

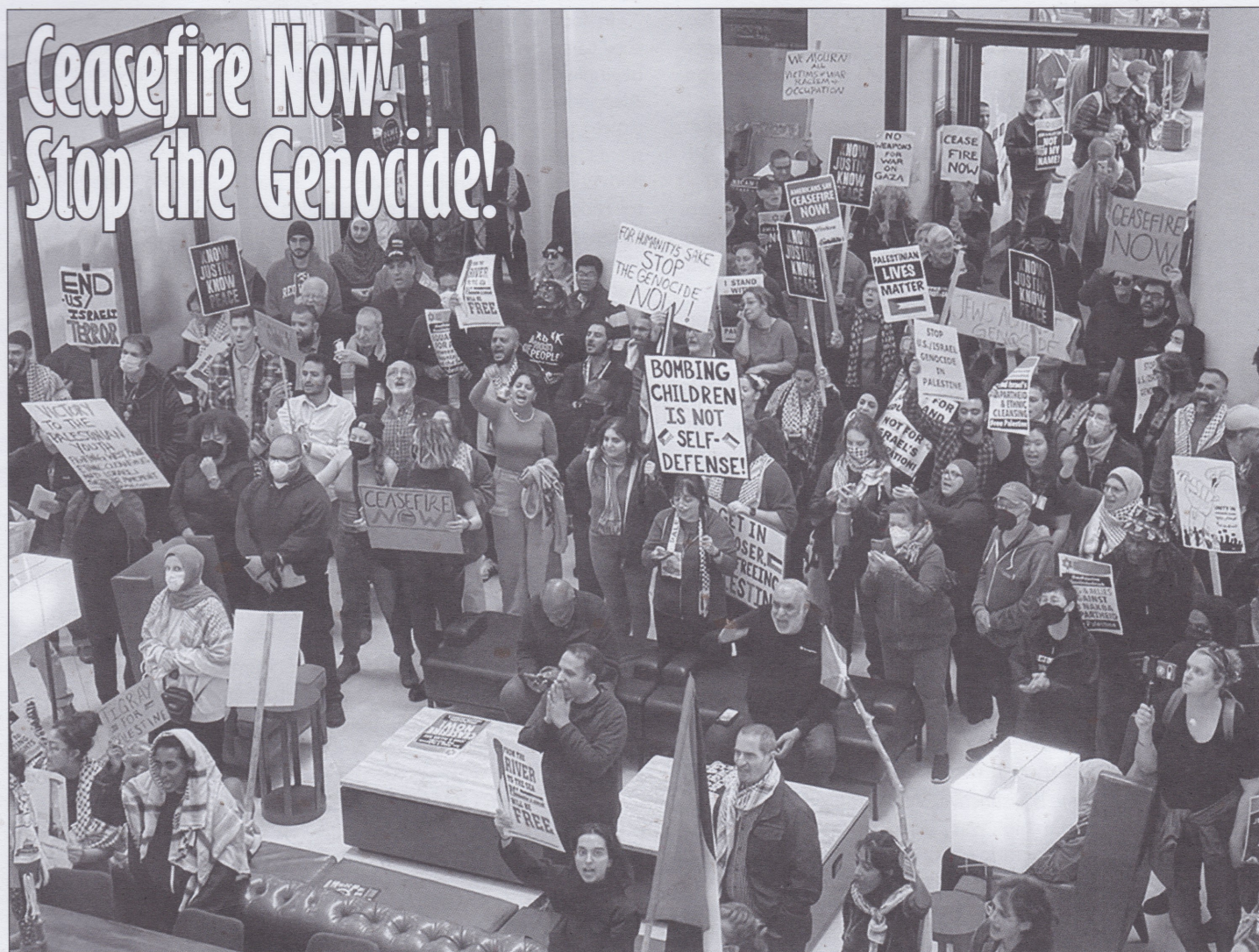
#227 • NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2023 • \$5

# A SOCIALIST JOURNAL

#227 • NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2023 • \$5

**AGAINST THE CURRENT**

A SOCIALIST JOURNAL



# On Consistent Anti-Imperialism

## ◆ PROMISE LI, HOWIE HAWKINS, SOLIDARITY, FOURTH INTERNATIONAL

## Fight Medicare and VA Privatization

◆ STEVE EARLY & SUZANNE GORDON

## Birmingham 1963, The Turning Point

◆ MALIK MIAH



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# A Letter from the Editors

## Auto: The Future on the Line

WE BELIEVE WE are on solid ground in calling the not-yet-ratified 2023 agreements the United Auto Workers has hammered out at General Motors, Ford and used-to-be-Chrysler Stellantis a breakthrough for U.S. labor.

The strikes concluded shortly before this issue of *Against the Current* went to press. While we don't yet have the full details of all three tentative agreements, we can say already that this strike holds historic significance in several ways. A major industrial union, with new leadership explicitly identifying itself with a rank-and-file-based insurgent movement, has undertaken a frontal assault on the whole raft of disastrous giveaways of more than two decades. At the same time, it has opened the door to becoming the work force in the joint-venture battery facilities from which they were going to be excluded. [For a discussion of some of the innovative tactics in this and recent labor struggles, see Dianne Feeley's article in this issue.]

Because most media coverage didn't go much beyond sound-bite quotes of what wage increases auto workers were seeking versus what the companies purportedly offered, it's worth reviewing a few of the union's demands. Half of UAW's 10 demands called for a reversal of concessions that the union had agreed to during the recession: tiered wages and benefits, use of permanent temporaries, and suspension of cost-of-living adjustment (COLA).

Although these givebacks were supposedly "sacrifices" necessary for workers to make in order to keep their jobs, the reality is that this resulted in corporations making whopping profits. Labor costs dropped from about 8% to 4-5%. Over the last four years, CEO compensation rose 40% while workers wages rose 6% — actually *lower* than the previous year given the rate of inflation.

Members hated the inequality they experienced working next to "temporaries" — who frequently worked from two to eight years without basic job security. United in their determination to end concessions, the so-called "legacy" workers [workers hired before 2007] and temps were told by the leadership it wasn't realistic to eliminate tiers.

The reform leadership won with the slogan "no concessions, no corruption, no tiers." Clearly the 2023 negotiations, were about reversing the power dynamic between the union and the Detroit Three.

### The Context and the Stakes

The context of the negotiations was rising U.S. labor activism, from workers in traditional industries to fast food, teachers, college campus, screenwriting and acting, and health care workers. In our previous issue (ATC 226) we've scrutinized, for example, what was won, and wasn't, by UPS Teamster workers although without a summer 2023 strike.

*The UAW dynamic is distinctive.* While the new Teamsters United union leadership was *allied* with the longtime Teamsters for a Democratic Union rank-and-file movement and welcomed activist "ready-to-strike" preparations, it did not identify with TDU. By comparison, the campaign waged by the new UAW president Shawn Fain and a majority of the governing International Executive Board (IEB) was more clearly backed by the insurgent movement Unite All Workers for Democracy.

But UAWD is nowhere near the size or with the roots of TDU, nor did it hold office in locals. As most readers will know, the new leadership resulted from the membership's newly instituted right to vote for top officers, replacing the system of "elections" at conventions tightly controlled by the Administration Caucus (AC). Established by Walter Reuther as a caucus with a social democratic ideology, the AC was

always authoritarian, extending its ruthless control over the union at all levels. But the increasingly sclerotic UAW leadership came to embrace and enforce restructuring as necessary in order for the membership to keep their jobs.

In fact, when wage tiers were "reluctantly" introduced, they came on top of previous retreats on working conditions beginning with the 1979-81 recession and going forward. Also added were various methods of intensifying work: team concept, draconian absentee policies, and whipsawing plants against each other like a game of musical chairs. By the mid-1990s the Detroit Three sold off parts plants in order to reduce their work force, but also to establish captive companies that had to follow strict guidelines.

This dictatorship by companies, enforced by the AC leadership, was able to blunt the various oppositions that developed over the years. In 2019, a small group of workers — UAWD — decided that meaningful change could only happen if top UAW officials faced direct elections. They drafted a resolution to have a special convention and change the constitutional provision for top officers to be elected at the delegated convention to a direct election. They were able to pass the resolution in a number of locals, but couldn't make the deadline, and resolved to begin again.

Meanwhile corruption scandals unfolded, sending more than a dozen Solidarity House officials to prison. The remaining members of the IEC, also AC members, argued it could self-monitor and eliminate corruption but were forced to accept a federal monitor to oversee the process.

UAWD decided to request a referendum on the election of top officers — and when the monitor agreed, won the vote. In the subsequent election and runoff, UAWD-backed candidates won half the IEB seats — including Shawn Fain as president. He won against the AC machine by 600 votes.

As the reform UAW leadership focused on the upcoming negotiations, Fain vowed "Record profits mean record contracts." The Detroit Three, having made \$21 billion in the first half of 2023, were prepared for a hike in wages but claimed they could do little more given the massive restructuring necessary to bring Electric Vehicles into production.

That raised the stakes even higher, as EV production requires less labor — potentially threatening big job losses. While each battery plant is projected to need 1,700-5,000 workers, the corporations set up them up as joint ventures. This was undoubtedly a decision to build a legal structure that denies automatic UAW representation. The UAW's demands had to find a way to address this future threat as well as reverse years of on-the-job inequality.

continued on the inside back cover



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Front Cover: Detroit demonstration at Michigan Senators' offices.

Above: UAW striker, updating a tradition.

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Barbara Barefield

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AGAINST THE CURRENT is published in order to promote dialogue among the activists, organizers and serious scholars of the left. We promote the vision of socialism from below, of a revolutionary, working-class, multinational and multiracial, feminist and antibureaucratic socialist movement. ATC is sponsored by Solidarity, a socialist organization founded in 1986, together with a group of advisory editors who believe that this magazine can contribute to building an effective U.S. socialist left.

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## Catastrophe in Palestine and Israel: Apartheid on the Road to Genocide

By David Finkel

ON THE MORNING of October 7, the nemesis that the Israeli state did much to create smashed over, under and through the border wall separating Gaza's "open air prison" from southern Israel. The brutal events that followed have opened the gates of hell — even wider than usual — in the Middle East.

Any number of illusions lie shattered, *beginning with the biggest* — the United States' government's view that a brokered "normalization" of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, plus other Arab Gulf monarchies, would make Palestine essentially disappear from view. It's essential to state up front the fundamental lesson that U.S. policy, enabling Israel's continual destruction of Palestine and its people's hopes, have made the 100-year Palestine-Zionist conflict into a *permanent crisis* with little hope of resolution.

At this writing the odds of an even bigger regional war, which no state actor wants, are unknown — "God forbid," in the words of professor Rashid Khalidi. But every day's events are more than horrific enough. They cannot be chronicled here, but where they're all too clearly leading has brought literally millions of people into the streets of the world demanding that the slaughter of Gaza end.

The editors have discussed the U.S. government's pretense of caring about Palestine in our previous editorial, "Palestine and Empire" (ATC 226). Although outdated by the current catastrophe, it may help provide a bit of background.

Also gone was Israel's "security" illusion of impenetrable walls, world-class surveillance technology, all-pervasive intelligence and the certainty of massive retaliation assuring that Hamas was "deterred," as a high-ranking Israeli officials repeatedly boasted. It's replaced by even deadlier delusions that the promised "complete destruction" of Hamas, which can't be accomplished without *tens and probably hundreds of thousands of deaths in Gaza*, will bring safety.

An illusion among some pro-Palestinian activists — that the Hamas attack represented an advance for the resistance and liberation struggle — also needs to be analyzed.

David Finkel is an editor of *Against the Current* and member of *Jewish Voice for Peace-Detroit*. The views expressed here are his own.

Briefly put, the deaths of 1400 Israelis, mostly civilians, is catastrophic for the Israeli *population* but doesn't threaten the *state*. That will be discussed below.

### Mapping the Catastrophe

Israel's government of Benjamin "Mr. Security" Netanyahu is the most viciously racist, anti-democratic and incompetent, and one of the most corrupt — although there is competition for that distinction — in the country's history. It is now probably also the most widely reviled for its catastrophic failures.

In fact, Israel's mass bombing and invasion of Gaza has one overriding priority beyond all other considerations — keeping Netanyahu's coalition in power and himself out of prison on multiple corruption charges. Neither Palestinian, nor Israeli, nor hostages' lives can get in the way of that supreme goal.

Because the coalition depends on the support of the fascist, open ethnic-cleansing Jewish Power and Religious Zionism Ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, the dimensions of the war are literally genocidal. That potential has been present in Israeli politics all along, but Netanyahu's need to hold political office for protection from prosecution (sound familiar?) overrides certain restraints on all-out destruction that global politics and U.S. interests usually impose.

Mustafa Barghouti, a physician in Ramallah and president of the Palestinian National Initiative, has repeatedly warned (for example on "Democracy Now," October 19) of a scenario where Israel depopulates and annexes northern Gaza, then turns to ethnically cleansing and annexing the West Bank.

"I never thought I would see Israel carrying out ethnic cleansing in the 21st century," says Dr. Barghouti, "but I admit I was wrong." For a similar warning, see "Gaza: between a second Nakba and the revival of the Oslo fiction" (Gilbert Achcar, <https://gilbert-achcar.net/gaza-between-nakba-and-oslo>).

In the immediate shock of October 7, with reports from southern Israel exploding in much of the world and especially in the United States, years of accumulating support for the Palestinian people's suffering under occupation began dissolving. The scale and brutality of the Hamas killings generated instantaneous sympathy for Israel. Within a

week, in turn, Israel's massive bombing, "total siege" and pending invasion of Gaza was converting much of that sympathy to revulsion.

Since then, we are frequently instructed that Israel's "right to defend itself" overrides consideration of the underlying conditions and history that produced the present situation. All that should wait till "Hamas terror is finished once and for all."

With all due disrespect, I must insist that the opposite is true. As Israeli apartheid embarks on the road toward genocide that many observers have warned as a potential outcome, you can't know where that road is going without some understanding of where it's coming from.

### Birthing the Fundamentalist Nemesis

Back in spring 1982 I was on a delegation of leftwing journalists to the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel, when we visited Bir Zeit University in the occupied West Bank. In addition to Israeli blockades and continual harassment of the school, the nationalist students, supporters of the Palestine Liberation Organization, also told us how Israeli authorities were allowing free passage to rightwing Islamists from Gaza to disrupt their campus activities.

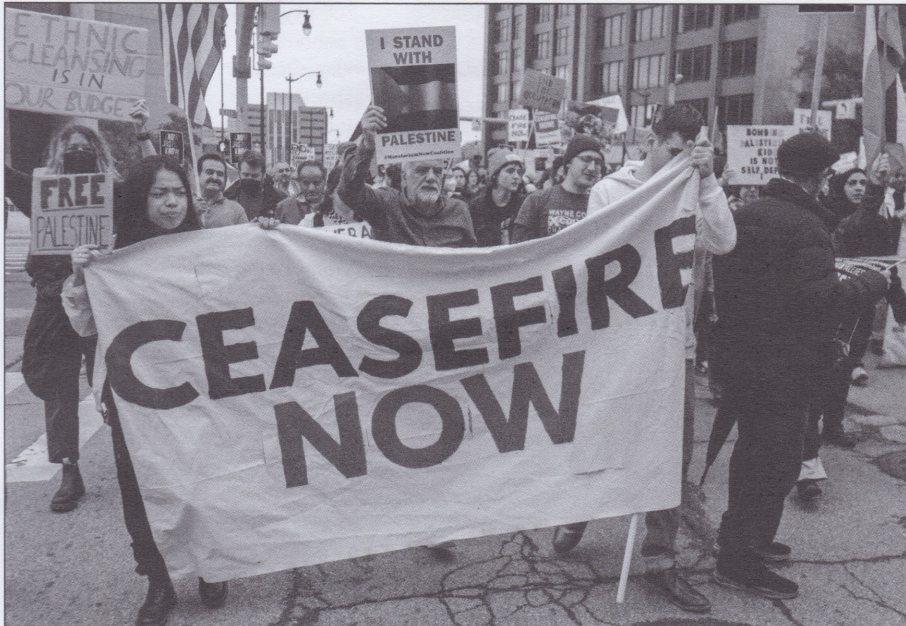
That was an ominous foretaste of Israel's preference then for Islamic fundamentalism over Palestinian nationalism. This cynical enemy-of-my-enemy ploy was not dissimilar to what the United States was carrying out in the same period — supporting Osama bin Laden's Islamic fundamentalist force in Afghanistan against the Soviets, which became al-Qaeda and would ultimately perpetrate the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Our discussion at Bir Zeit, as it happened, was only months before Israel's invasion of Lebanon, culminating in the September Sabra and Shatila refugee camp massacres and the expulsion of the PLO from Beirut.

It was a massive defeat for Palestinian nationalism, and also produced the rise in Lebanon (with Iranian sponsorship) of the Shia fundamentalist movement Hezbollah, which became and remains Israel's most significant military adversary.

Hamas (an Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement) formed in 1987, a Gaza wing of the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood. By the mid-2000s, Hamas was





Detroit march for a ceasefire in Gaza.

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gaining strength to fill the vacuum of effective resistance with the decline of the Palestinian left and the Israeli-U.S. success in turning the Palestinian National Authority (PA, created following the 1993 Oslo Accords) into a client of the Occupation.

Even while Israeli settlements spread like an uncontrolled cancer in the West Bank, in 2006 a remarkable breakthrough took place in Palestinian life. An election in the West Bank and Gaza for leadership of the PA was declared free and fair by the Carter Center, and widely viewed as a democratic example for the Middle East.

To the surprise of everyone — including Hamas — the Islamist movement won, defeating the dominant PLO faction (Fatah). A horrified U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton bewailed the failure of the United States to ensure the election result would come out differently.

Yasser Arafat, longtime leader of the PLO and the symbol of Palestinian nationalism, had died in 2004 (quite likely poisoned by Israeli agents although the assassination was never acknowledged). With the PLO's popular support dramatically declining, both parties recognized the reality of their fragile voting bases — most people had not voted for Islamic fundamentalist ideology, but rather in protest against the PA's and PLO's incompetence and corruption.

Accordingly, Fatah and Hamas initiated a process of forming a Palestinian unity government. That exercise in Palestinian democratic politics was absolutely unacceptable to the United States and Israel. What happened next was told by journalist David Rose in an investigative report "The Gaza Bombshell" (*Vanity Fair*, April 2008). As the article's introduction summarizes:

"After failing to anticipate Hamas's victory

over Fatah in the 2006 Palestinian election, the White House cooked up yet another scandalously covert and self-defeating Middle East debacle: part Iran-contra, part Bay of Pigs. With confidential documents, corroborated by outraged former and current U.S. officials, the author reveals how President Bush, Condoleezza Rice, and Deputy National-Security Adviser Elliott Abrams backed an armed force under Fatah strongman Muhammad Dahlan, touching off a bloody civil war in Gaza and leaving Hamas stronger than ever."

The coup failed, leaving the remnant of the PLO administering the Palestinian Authority in the scraps of territory left to it in the West Bank. Hamas consolidated its control of Gaza.

The strip of land has remained ever since under tightening Israeli siege, periodic operations that Israeli officials call "mowing the grass" with targeted assassinations and bombing civilian infrastructure, food supplies restricted to subsistence levels, electricity supplied for a few hours daily, water increasingly undrinkable, and the matrix of horrors chronicled in unbearable but essential detail in Norman Finkelstein's book *Gaza. An Inquest into its Martyrdom* (University of California Press, 2018).

The caged-in population of Gaza, the great majority of whom are refugees and their descendants from the 1948 mass dispossession and expulsion of Palestinians from Israel, has grown to two and a half million in a strip of land roughly the size of Detroit. After each previous round of pulverization, partial reconstruction is financed from sources in the Arab world, notably Qatar, and some international agencies.

Hamas itself attempted to reconcile its ideological opposition to Israel's existence with the hard facts of its governmental responsibilities. Its political wing in particular

signaled willingness to live with some kind of two-state solution, if that was the will of the Palestinian people. Israel's leadership, of any political bloc, showed no interest. Crumbs of aid and opening a handful of jobs in Israel for desperate Gaza workers would assure what Israel cynically called "quiet for quiet."

So pleased were Israeli authorities with the stability of the status quo that they confidently moved military units to serve and protect fanatical West Bank settlers while they raid and pillage Palestinian villages, burn fields and uproot priceless olive trees. Towns in southern Israel were left barely guarded. But before October 7, what could go wrong?

### Facing Brutal Facts

It is necessary to face hard facts of October 7 and the aftermath. The extraordinary organization, secret preparation, complexity and sheer power of the Hamas attack truly shocked the world.

So did the extreme brutality of the mass murders that it committed. Unless there was a breakdown of command and control, it would appear that the raid's principal purpose was to kill people — even more than taking captives to exchange for more than six thousand Palestinian prisoners (including 360 children) held in Israel, many under "administrative detention" orders without charges or trial.

Claims that some Israeli citizens may have been killed in the army's assaults to regain control (see for example [Mondoweiss.net](http://Mondoweiss.net), October 22, "A growing number of reports indicate Israeli forces responsible for Israeli civilian and military deaths following October 7 attack") are unverified, but wouldn't be unprecedented in Israel's history of dealing with hostage crises.

Nonetheless, large-scale murders on October 7 by Hamas militants are extensively documented in body-cam and cell phone footage as well as survivors' accounts. It included indiscriminate butchery of families in their homes — and of many civilians who could have been captured but instead were gunned down.

The extent of the killing beyond any evident strategic goal marks this as a hideous action, nothing to do with advancing Palestinian resistance or any progressive purpose.

It displays even more appalling indifference to the incineration it would bring down on the civilian Gaza population. In what way would this "advance" the struggle?

The moral and political crimes of Hamas include its failure to carry out construction of civilian bomb shelters and emergency supplies in the face of repeated rounds of Israeli air and ground assault.

Supporters of Palestinian freedom need to face what this says about the real nature of Hamas, as well as the way it has ruled in Gaza. Recognizing the absolutely essen-



tial right of oppressed peoples to resist, including with arms, does not absolve us of the responsibility to analyze the methods and politics of the forces acting in their name.

The criminality is all the greater if, as some analysts suggest, a purpose of the Hamas attack was deliberately to draw Israel into a ground invasion. Could the organization's military or political leadership have imagined that regional state powers would come to its rescue?

Inevitably, as always the enormous power of Israel's military machine with full U.S. support rapidly dwarfed the 1400 Israeli deaths on October 7. These were easily doubled by Palestinian lives lost in just the first few days of Israel's retaliatory bombing and the "total siege" that Netanyahu promised would "wipe out" Hamas, "change Gaza forever" and "reverberate for generations." At this writing, Gaza's Health Ministry estimates that the death toll among Palestinians numbers over 8,000.

This was before a ground invasion of Gaza, before hospitals lost the last of their generator fuel, and before Israel bombed people who followed its orders to flee south — and for what purpose on the Israeli side?

After Israel's enabling the rise of the forces that became Hamas, can it now be "eliminated" without a mass slaughter of at least tens of thousands of Gaza civilians and the forced removal of probably hundreds of thousands more? Where would they supposedly go?

Who if anyone would rebuild Gaza this time? Will a "smaller Gaza with fewer people," as an Israeli government minister promises, re-create Israeli delusions of security? Does Israel intend to reoccupy the place or turn it over to a totally discredited PA, a pathetic client of the Occupation?

There are press pundits promoting all these obscene scenarios and more, all based on perpetuating Israel's apartheid-colonial control.

### The Respo.5es

Amidst worldwide outcry for an immediate ceasefire, the State Department prohibited its officers from the very mention of the term. Beyond "standing with Israel" and rushing more weaponry that it doesn't even need to destroy Gaza many times over, the U.S. plan seems to consist of pursuing Israeli-Saudi "normalization" over the smoking ruins of Israel's war on Palestine.

Joe Biden stated the truism that "Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people..." Indeed, what polling is available indicates that Hamas may be supported by around 20% of



Detroit rally for Palestinian lives.

<https://jimwestphoto.com>

Gaza's population, maybe much less.

(Jim Zogby of the Arab American Institute estimates more like 11%. See also Amaney A. Jamal and Michael Robbins, "What Palestinians Really Think of Hamas," *Foreign Affairs*, October 25, 2023. This new poll was completed just before Oct. 7 when the Israel-Gaza war broke out. A few of many results: Both Hamas and Fatah have the support no more than 30% and much less by most measures.)

But such U.S. pronouncements hardly square with statements by Israel's state president Herzog that "Gaza is Hamas," or Benjamin Netanyahu at the United Nations displaying a flag showing Greater Israel including Gaza and the West Bank. That's the real-life result that Biden's pledge of massive new military assistance for Israel will provide.

Meanwhile the new catastrophe has revealed, and deepened, the polarization in the U.S. Jewish community over Israel and Palestine. During the week of October 16 in actions on a scale never seen before, Jewish Voice for Peace, If Not Now and other Jewish-led solidarity organizations shut down exits from the White House on Monday and swarmed Capitol Hill on Wednesday, demanding an immediate cease-fire. The JVP-led October 27 mass sit-in shut down New York Grand Central Station with over 400 arrests.

But a typical establishment response was penned in the *Detroit Free Press* (Sunday, October 16) by Rabbi Asher Lopatin, who has an undeserved reputation as a moderate and conciliating voice:

"Hamas' wholesale targeting and murder of families babies, children, mothers and grandmothers — was the worst one-day catastrophe for our people since the Holocaust. And it brought back memories of the pogroms in Eastern Europe before and after the Russian Revolution, when Jews were attacked and killed in brutal raids. But this time even more extreme, like the brutality practiced by ISIS, but this time ISIS is here for the Jews."

Some historical context is missing here, to say the least! Jewish communities targeted by pogroms in Europe, let alone in the Nazi genocide, were not only defenseless but even more important, had nothing to do with creating the conditions that led to their murder.

The Israeli victims of the Hamas attack, certainly innocent in themselves, were citizens of the grotesquely self-described "nation-state of the Jewish people" — a state that not only claimed to be defending them, but produced the conditions for their murder and helped set in motion the force that perpetrated the October 7 massacre.

Comparisons of Hamas with ISIS, like Netanyahu's pronouncement that "Hamas is ISIS" (and Biden's blather that "these guys make al-Qaeda look pure"), provides a cover for war without limit or restraint, while West Bank settler atrocities escalate by the day. It's more accurate to see Hamas and the Israeli occupation as asymmetric, but symbiotic, death-spiral dance partners.

One can say that the Israeli government and Hamas, each for their own reasons, wanted the current war, and the United States is either unwilling or incompetent to stop it. On the other hand, none of the state actors want the apocalypse of a regional war — not Israel, not Saudi Arabia or Iran, certainly not Lebanon which would be annihilated, and not the USA.

If, however, states and/or their client forces blindly stagger into a regional war, then no one knows where it will lead or how much the gates of hell might swallow.

Demanding an immediate cease-fire for Gaza has become the global movement's central driving priority. The spreading outrage around the world, along with the growing protest among U.S. Palestinians, Arabs, progressive sectors of the Jewish community and other allies in solidarity, are the best hope right now for blocking the road to genocide.

October 30, 2023



## Cease the Genocide Now — Stop Arming Israel! Stand with Palestinian Workers

By Labor for Palestine

*"WE NEED YOU to take immediate action — wherever you are in the world — to prevent the arming of the Israeli state and the companies involved in the infrastructure of the blockade." An Urgent Call from Palestinian Trade Unions: End all Complicity, Stop Arming Israel (October 16, 2023)*

The undersigned U.S. workers, trade unionists, and anti-apartheid activists join labor around the world in condemning the Israeli siege on Gaza and sharply escalating settler colonial violence in the West Bank that has killed or maimed thousands of Palestinians — many of them children — and stand with Palestinians' "right to exist, resist, return, and self-determination."

The latest Israeli attacks reflect more than a century of ongoing Zionist settler-colonialism, dispossession, ethnic cleansing, racism, genocide, and apartheid — including Israel's establishment through the uprooting and displacement of over 750,000 Palestinians during the 1947-1948 Nakba. Indeed, eighty percent of the 2.3 million people in Gaza are refugees from other parts of historic Palestine.

Israel's crimes are only possible because of more than \$3.8 billion a year (or \$10+ million per day) in bipartisan US military aid that gives Israel the guns, bullets, tanks, ships, jet fighters, missiles, helicopters, white phosphorus and other weapons to kill and maim the Palestinian people. This is the same system of racist state violence that, through shared surveillance technology and police exchange programs, brutalizes BIPOC and working class people in the United States and around the world.

In response, we demand an immediate end to the genocide, and embrace the recent Urgent Call from Palestinian Trade Unions: End all Complicity, Stop Arming Israel:

- To refuse to build weapons destined for Israel.
- To refuse to transport weapons to Israel.
- To pass motions in their trade union to this effect.
- To take action against complicit companies involved in implementing Israel's brutal and illegal siege, especially if they have contracts with your institution.
- Pressure governments to stop all military trade with Israel, and in the case of the U.S., funding to it.

We further reaffirm the call on labor bodies to respect previous Palestinian trade union appeals to boycott the Israeli labor federation (<https://electronicintifada.net/>, July 7, 2015) by adopting this statement, and/or the model resolution below to divest from Israel Bonds, sever all ties with the Israel's racist labor federation, the Histadrut, and its US mouthpiece, the Jewish Labor Committee, and respect the Palestinian picket line for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS).

*Initial Signers on behalf of Labor for Palestine.  
(organizational affiliations listed  
for identification only)*

Suzanne Adely, Labor for Palestine, US  
Palestinian Community Network, Arab  
Workers Resource Center; Food Chain



Workers Alliance (staff);  
President, National Lawyers  
Guild  
Monadel Herzallah, Arab  
American Union Members  
Council

Ruth Jennison, Department  
Rep., Massachusetts Society  
of Professors, MTA, NEA;  
Co-Chair, Labor Standing

Committee River Valley DSA; Delegate to  
Western Mass Area Labor Federation  
Lara Kiswani, Executive Director, Arab  
Resource & Organizing Center (AROC);  
Block the Boat

Michael Letwin, Former President, Association  
of Legal Aid Attorneys/UAW Local 2325;  
Jews for Palestinian Right of Return

For more information or to sign on:  
<https://laborforpalestine.net>

### Resolution on Divestment from Israel Bonds and on Transparency in Investments funded through Union Membership Dues

*THE FOLLOWING RESOLUTION was approved July 22, 2022 by a membership vote of The Association of Legal Aid Attorneys, UAW Local 2325, by a margin of 555-182:*

Whereas in May of 2021, Palestinian labor unions organized a historic general strike and issued a call appealing to their union siblings around the world to take a role in helping to "build a new anti-apartheid movement" through our work; and

Whereas current investments funded by UAW member dues are not disclosed to members, but holdings in Israel bonds by the American labor community have in the past been estimated to total billions of dollars; and

Whereas UAW's International Executive Board has, without adequate justification, nullified democratic resolutions by locals which called for divestment from Israel; and

Whereas human rights experts at international and Israeli human rights groups including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the United Nations Human Rights Council, and B'Tselem have concluded that the Israel now functions as an apartheid state; and

Whereas Israeli law grants a high degree of free movement to Jewish settlers in occupied territory, while strictly policing movement of Palestinians in that same space; and

Whereas the goals of an international workers' movement are advanced by rejecting systems such as apartheid that privilege one particular ethnic/religious group over another; and

Whereas ALAA 2325 has previously recognized the societal harm and the discrediting effect upon labor movements that results from union cooperation with bodies "which uphold and reinforce racist oppression," such as police unions;

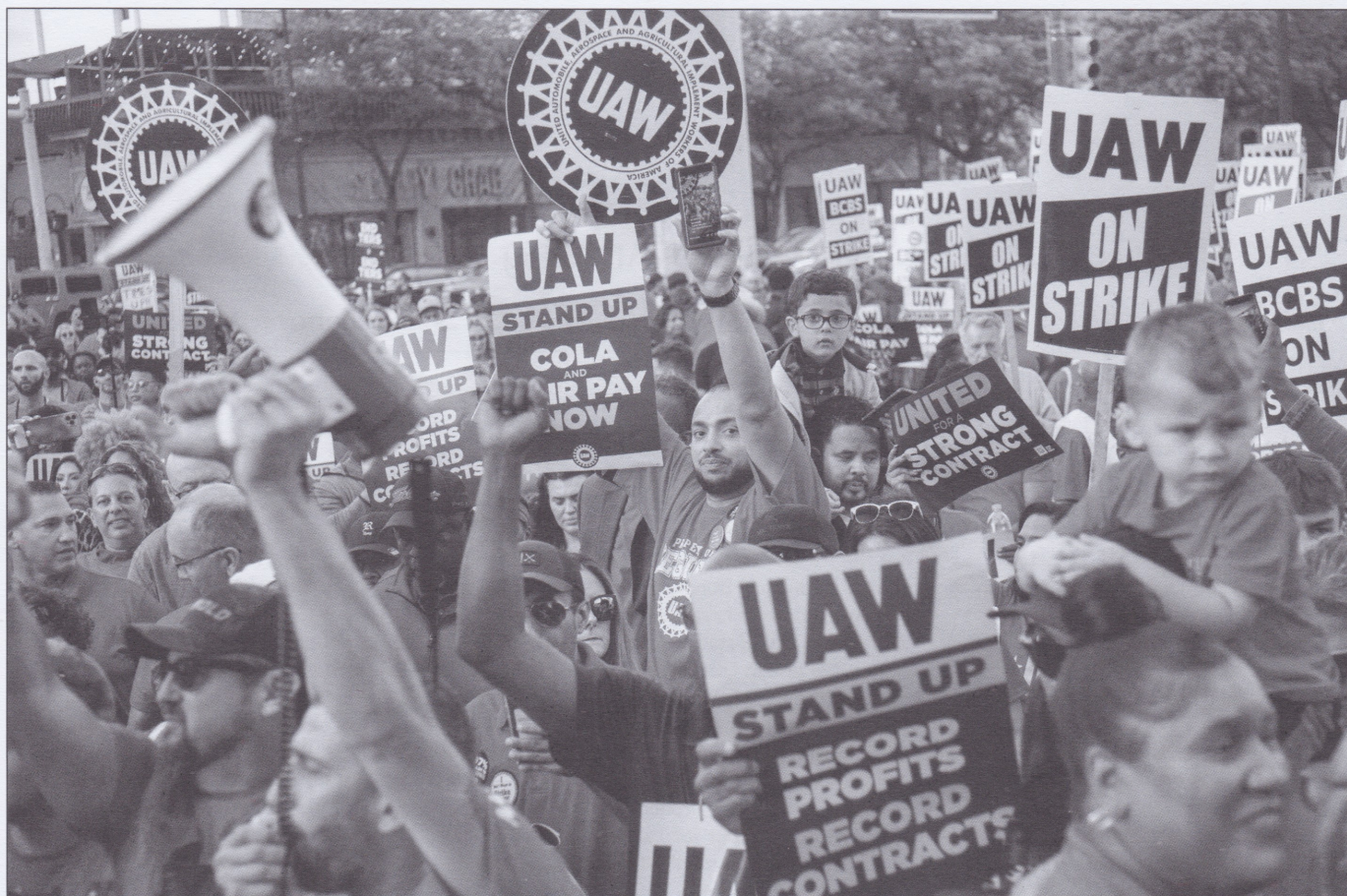
Therefore be it resolved that ALAA 2325 supports taking action, both as individual members and as a chapter collectively, in support of Palestinian liberation from Israeli apartheid; and

Be it further resolved that ALAA 2325 calls on UAW International to divest itself from any and all Israel bonds; and

Be it further resolved that ALAA 2325 calls on UAW to practice full transparency in any current or future holdings funded by member dues; and

Be it further resolved that ALAA 2325 calls on UAW to develop democratic processes by which members can call for divestment from funds that are in conflict with members' interests and values. ■





The UAW strategy was based on the energy of the workers at the Detroit Three facilities.

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## Strategies for Union Victories

By Dianne Feeley

OVER THE PAST year several unions have adopted innovative and militant strategies as they go into bargaining with their employers. Central has been organizing campaigns to *build membership participation*. One key element has been to publicize corporate profitability. Providing this information includes tracing where the profit was invested — or more likely, misspent. This reinforced worker confidence in the need to take action.

At United Parcel Service (UPS), the Teamsters represent 340,000 workers under the largest private sector labor contract. Winning the 2020 election with a reform slate for top officers, the Teamsters launched a campaign to take on the successful corporation.

In fact, the reason the coalition of reformers won was dissatisfaction with concessions that the James Hoffa leadership had imposed through an arcane constitutional rule.

Along with disgust over the previous leadership, members realized how profitable UPS became during the pandemic as workers kept the economy humming. Yet workers had endangered their lives and those of their families. Teamsters were also pushed

to the breaking point as they worked forced overtime while UPS accumulated enormous profits. In the eight years before the pandemic, UPS's yearly profit ranged from \$7.1 to \$8.2 billion. Then in 2021 UPS profits soared to \$13.1 billion, reaching \$13.9 billion the following year.

Yet for the 2023 contract UPS wanted the flexibility to introduce a seven-day schedule, build in more surveillance over workers and continue use of contract workers.

### Ready to Strike

The old contract ended midnight July 31, 2023. Launching kickoff rallies the year before, the union surveyed its members to nail down core demands. That was followed by a campaign to sign pledge cards committed to striking if that became necessary.

This work involved union staff but more importantly activated the union ranks. The participation of the longtime Teamsters for a Democratic Union was essential in encouraging members to become activists.

By spring, the Teamsters were holding webinars, launching trainings to map out workplaces, holding parking lot rallies, and developing concrete plans for making sure everyone was “strike ready.” They developed

a UPS Teamsters app so members could follow negotiations.

Part of the preparation compared CEO Carol Tomé earning \$27.6 million while UPS part-timers were making as little as \$15.50 an hour. Since UPS drivers are much better paid than loaders, it was important to expose the reality of that spread.

Usually negotiators don't reveal what is taking place at the bargaining table but only detail the gains in the tentative agreement (TA) at the end of the process. But President Sean O'Brien announced agreements as UPS signed off on each issue. This meant the membership was able to keep track.

Members felt breaking with the blackout around negotiations was liberating. It became increasingly clear they were winning significant gains — gains some of the old guard had declared impossible to win.

One Teamster driver I spoke with was afraid that the negotiating team would prioritize wage increases over demands around better working conditions. Given the relative transparency, he could see his fear was misplaced.

When contract negotiations broke down three weeks before the strike deadline, the union encouraged “practice picketing” before

*Dianne Feeley is an editor of ATC and a retired autoworker active in Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD).*



or after work. These actions showed the corporation that the Teamster ranks were well prepared to strike.

Bloomberg predicted a strike could cost UPS \$170 million a day as well as a probable loss in market share. Faced with that reality, UPS came back to the table and quickly put forward a proposal and signed off on the agreement.

While some members and labor analysts think the Teamsters could have won more by striking, nearly half the membership turned out to vote, and 86.3% voted yes.

What is needed now is to make sure the contract gains are enforced as militantly as the contract campaign. Hopefully members will remain innovative and aggressive here too. (See Kim Moody and Barry Eidlin's articles in ATC 226 for their analyses.)

### Learning from the Teamsters

With the UAW contract expiring six weeks after the Teamster-UPS one, the newly elected reform UAW officers viewed the Teamsters contract campaign as a model.

The enormously profitable corporations were happy with being able to keep temporary workers (called "supplementals" at Stellantis) as temps, to be made permanent or fired at their discretion. They were also interested in maintaining a two-tier structure. This guaranteed that when temps became permanent and began an eight-year progression to the top wage scale, they never acquired benefits equal to those hired before 2007. The Detroit Three were willing to offer what they considered a reasonable wage hike, around 9-10%.

The reform officers needed to demonstrate their determination to carry out their campaign slogan, "No concessions, no corruption, no tiers." Implementing that slogan could only be accomplished by activating a membership who had been instructed to "leave the work to the leadership."

Winning office in the aftermath of a dozen high-ranking UAW officials admitted to stealing two million dollars of the members' dues money and imprisoned, they had to figure out how to activate a membership disgusted by corruption and told for years it should accept concessions to keep the plants open.

The new leadership knew they had to win workers' trust. They began by gathering names and inviting members to attend YouTube/Facebook Live weekly updates. Each week a text or email went out; each week the number of autoworkers watching the video grew.

During the first few programs UAW President Shawn Fain focused on of the Detroit Three's profitability. Between 2013 and 2022 they'd made a quarter trillion dollars in profits, paid top management handsomely, plowed the money back into stock buybacks and closed 65 plants.

Fain maintained that if CEOs had a 40% increase in their salaries, workers deserved no less. The battle was between working people and the billionaire class.

Typically, the opening round of negotiation starts when the UAW president shakes hands with the Detroit Three's CEOs. Fain announced that since the demands being put on the table were from the membership, he'd shake hands with members. Only when there was a fair contract would he have some reason to shake hands with CEOs.

As negotiations opened, Fain and his team went to a Ford, GM and Stellantis plant in the Detroit area. He greeted members as they were coming in or leaving work. He shook their hands and his team signed them up for updates. Whether or not the leadership of the local was on board or not, members had access to information.

This event signaled to the membership and the larger public that the negotiations were going to be conducted differently. How could be that interest be channeled?

### Reversing Concessions, Building Solidarity

While taking on corporate greed remained a theme, the focus of the weekly meetings began to shift to a discussion of the 10 demands. The majority were to restore what workers had previously won, then lost in the 2009 economic recession.

Cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) had been suspended. Since most of the COLA money won during a given contract was then folded into the base wage in the following one, this loss suppressed wages ever since.

Another important concession allowed the Detroit Three to retain newly hired workers as temporaries rather than moving to permanent status after 90 working days.

Even once made permanent, workers hired after 2007 earned a lesser wage with few benefits. At first the lower-tiered worker had an inferior health care package along with no post-retirement health care or pension.

Over the years, UAW members always raised demands to get rid of the abuse of temporary workers and end the system of tiered wages and benefits. Some adjustments have been made in subsequent contracts, but the tiers remained, or even metastasized, much to the dismay of the membership.

Another demand called for raising retiree pensions. For years, retirees had mobilized at UAW Bargaining Conventions, raising the demand that contract negotiations include COLA in pensions.

Although that had never been implemented, occasionally retirees received a "Christmas bonus" in lieu of COLA or even a slight raise in the pension formula.

This issue has particular relevance because many autoworkers have parents and grandparents who worked in the industry so there

is a closer relationship among generations than in many other workplaces. There is also wide acknowledgement that the older generation fought for decent wages and benefits; it is the responsibility of the current workforce to support them.

Two other demands raised the issue of job security; less forced overtime and the right to strike over plant closures. Fain resurrected a UAW slogan — 32 hours work for 40 hours pay — and pointed out that workers should receive a benefit from automation.

These weekly presentations also announced what was happening in the other industries represented by the UAW including 1,000 strikers at Blue Cross Blue Shield and the 4,000 strikers at Mack Truck. Successful organizing at new worksites was also a regular feature. These short announcements functioned to knit UAW members across various industries. It encouraged a sense of solidarity across the various sectors of the union — what Fain called the UAW family.

### How to Strike?

As the September 15 strike deadline approached, presentations encouraged talking to coworkers about the unfolding negotiations. The union held practice sessions in locals and over Zoom demonstrating how to do this.

A revamped UAW website prominently listed the demands, latest news, and short videos where workers told their story spending years as a temp, sometimes forced to relocate to a plant far from home.

After the iconic hand shaking, an incident on Facebook Live confirmed the UAW's no-nonsense approach. Fain discussed Stellantis' assertion of its right to close 18 plants and then threw the proposal in the trash can, remarking that's where the contract proposal belonged. The gesture and remark went viral.

Entering the final stretch of negotiations, the UAW had always selected one corporation as its target. If negotiations didn't produce a contract by the deadline, the UAW would strike the company's facilities. Once the agreement was settled, it would become the template for winning a pattern contract at the other two.

But as Fain continued to discuss the profitability of all three, it became clear all were going to be targeted. Might all 150,000 members walk out all together? With a strike fund of \$825 million, the union could afford \$500 a week plus health care for a couple of months.

Or would the leadership choose targeted strikes across the Detroit Three? In the 1990s when the UAW had targeted two GM parts plants, just 11,000 strikers were able to halt production across most GM facilities.

Two hours before the contract deadline this leadership announced a "Stand Up Strike" strategy of targeted strikes. Fain



announced that workers in just three assembly plants — one from each corporation — would walk out. The UAW had fired its warning shot.

This approach provided the UAW negotiating committee with maximum flexibility in pressuring companies. It could expand the number of facilities going out on strike and escalate by targeting increasingly profitable companies. UAW negotiators were in the driver's seat as they forced corporations to compete with each other and were able to punish or reward them on a weekly schedule.

The Detroit Three were in the dark about which of their facilities would be targeted. Given the update schedule, corporations faced a weekly deadline to produce or face the another site being shut down. A positive response could be rewarded with a reprieve, but only until the following week.

The "Stand Up Strike," was a strategy that put membership pressure on the corporations whether workers were striking or still working. Just as during the sit-downs of the 1930s, the energy built through the campaign leading up to the strike continued to build as everyone had a job to do.

While those still working were under expired contracts, members were encouraged to refuse all voluntary overtime, keep their eyes out for management attempts to alter procedures, wear red on Wednesdays and discuss the negotiations with coworkers. Many spent time on other UAW picket lines.

Workers found unique ways of sticking to the rules but not doing anything more. For example, at GM's sprawling and very profitable Arlington Assembly plant, skilled trades workers decided to forgo riding bikes to their assignments. It took them considerably longer to arrive on foot, but there was no requirement to bike from one site to another.

This strategy is a variation on "work to rule." Given how new it was for those still working to operate in uncharted territory and protect themselves from management reprisals, this technique requires less coordination. It gave workers a list of things they could do and an opportunity to be creative in applying them.

In addition to maintaining 24/7 picket lines, UAW members and community supporters attended rallies in Detroit and Chicago. During the first week, strikers at the Jeep plant in Toledo, Ohio caravanned to the Ford Michigan Assembly plant near Detroit, spent the afternoon picketing and then caravanned back.

This expression of solidarity was then matched by Michigan Assembly strikers caravanning to the Jeep plant. Once the strikers at the GM Wentzville plant near St. Louis heard about the caravans, they decided that with no striking plant nearby, they would caravan from one department of the complex to another.

This example of spontaneous striker initiative spread. The following week, with members at 38 GM and Stellantis parts distribution facilities on strike, UAW Local 51 on Detroit's east side organized a car and motorcycle caravan to circle all the assembly and distribution centers in the area. The lead car stopped at every picket line, and Regional Director LaShawn English got out and shook every striker's and supporter's hand.

When negotiations are transparent and members feel empowered, spontaneous actions develop. So too with community involvement: witness the stacks of wood that appeared once autumn weather kicked in and burn barrels were set up.

Unions and a variety of organizations also worked to stock food pantries at local union halls, and made sure food and water went directly to the picket lines.

### Keeping Active and Informed

This state of self-activity is in contrast with the past, when picketers were discouraged from talking to the media. We were told that if we said "the wrong thing" it might endanger the negotiations. This time the UAW president's office organized at least one Zoom meeting to outline how members might effectively tell their stories to the press.

Every Friday thousands of autoworkers watched the Facebook Live updates to learn about the week's negotiations and whether the strike needed to expand or hold firm.

With the UAW breaking with the tradition of keeping silent on negotiations, Ford and GM broke their silence and began to circulate videos in plant break rooms. The Detroit Three also told their side of the story to the press. But based on various surveys, majority sentiment across the country overwhelmingly supported striking workers.

Of the three corporations Ford was the most outspoken. As negotiations neared its final round, CEO Jim Farley complained that the UAW was asking for too much. As a guy who made \$21 million plus stock options last year, he became a source of hours' worth of picket line jokes.

The following week Bill Ford turned up at the Rouge complex, imploring workers to see themselves as partners with Ford management and in competition with the non-unionized, foreign-owned automakers.

When asked by the press for a response, Fain remarked that UAW members should see the non-unionized work force as their future union brothers and sisters. He emphasized working-class solidarity over nativist calls to make common cause with American billionaires.

That's similar to the answer Fain had when Donald Trump said he'd come to Michigan to be with the workers. He urged them to stop paying their union dues. Objecting to Fain's statement that green jobs should

be good jobs, Trump announced that the UAW strategy would lead union members to joblessness. He, on the other hand, could "settle the dispute" and Fain could take a two-month vacation.

To all that, Fain remarked that Trump was part of the billionaire class that working people needed to fight.

When Trump came to Michigan, he didn't go to a picket line but to a non-unionized parts facility where the press did not manage to find one striker in the crowd. They did locate a couple of autoworkers who supported Trump, but not his analysis of UAW strategy.

### Pressure Produces Contract

When Fain invited everyone to join a UAW picket line, including the president, President Joe Biden, the first sitting president to do so. A self-defined "car guy," he made a statement in support of the right of workers to strike for higher wages. This moment closed off the possibility of having a federal mediator step in as a so-called "neutral" party. That was important for the UAW since federal intervention often forces a union into compromise.

As the strike was about to enter its fifth week, the UAW maximized the pressure on Ford by striking its most profitable plant, Kentucky Truck Assembly. This plant brings in \$25 billion a year in revenue. That means it is producing \$48,000 in revenue every minute of the work day. The strike was a surprise attack because previously strikes were announced during Friday updates, but this happened on Wednesday.

At that point there seemed to be two issues still on the table: pensions, and whether the joint ventures battery plants Ford is setting up would be covered in the contract.

With negotiations continuing at all three, the UAW announced that the companies had become used to Friday strikes and waited for last-minute negotiations. Chaos was now not just about which plant would be struck but also about the timing.

Next to go down was Stellantis' most profitable plant, Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) with GM's Arlington Assembly the next day. Both plants bring in an annual \$20 billion in revenue. With those additions, one-third of the Detroit Three UAW members were on the picket lines, two-thirds still at work, doing their part.

Within a day, fearing that the UAW might strike the Rouge Truck plant — where the country's biggest selling truck, the electric F-150 is produced — Ford reached a TA with the union. Stellantis followed three days later. GM brought up the rear two days after that, but only after suffering one more profitable plant go on strike.

The Ford and Stellantis TAs are now available on the UAW website with GM soon to follow. Facebook Live presentations and local



discussions are taking place; voting has begun.

All three agreements include a 25% wage increase (40% had been demand) and restoration of COLA. Temporary workers are to be made permanent within nine months (demand had been within 90 days) and eligible even as temps for benefits including a signing bonus. Once temps become permanent, they can reach top pay within three years, with their temp time counting. (It had previously taken eight years.)

Almost all of the demands were addressed, but except for restoring COLA not completely won. The hardest are to win are post-retirement pensions and health care. That's settled as far as the Detroit Three are concerned: They uploaded health care onto a Veba the union is responsible for and substituted 401ks for pensions.

This time they raised the percentage of their contribution to 401ks, and didn't require an employee match. Many workers believe 401ks are better — they are portable where pensions are not — so I didn't see we had the strength or time to win on that issue.

Since fewer U.S. workers receive these benefits the UAW needs to think deeply about how we can fight for these benefits while also rededicating ourselves to Medicare for all and adequate social security.

In my opinion, the most important elements of the tentative agreements are:

- Restoration of COLA.
- The concrete steps taken to end the abuse of temps and bring up the wages of a multitiered work force. This includes bringing distribution parts facilities and a few other sites up to standard wages.
- Opening the door to the unionization of

the joint-venture battery operations.

Ford agreed to bring its joint-venture plants in Marshall, Michigan and Tennessee into the contract when either the majority of UAW members transferred in or through card check. The Stellantis agreement recognizes the UAW at its new Belvidere battery plant by simply leasing them to work there.

Earlier GM had agreed to recognize the UAW at its joint-venture battery facilities, most of which are scheduled to open between 2024 and 2027. Previously an overwhelming majority of Lordstown battery workers voted to join the UAW and an interim agreement negotiated.

- Raising the issue of work/life balance, the union asserted that workers have the right to a life outside of work.

The slogan and its motivation got more resonance from workers than I thought possible in an industry where overtime is a given and too many workers rely on it. The actual result in this contract is small — establishing Juneteenth as a paid holiday and Ford's offer for a two-week paid parental leave. Measly by the standards of European countries, it is breakthrough for U.S. industrial workers.

I think it is important to raise demands that might not be implemented but can raise the consciousness of the workers even beyond the specific workplace. It wasn't possible to win some of the demands, but that may be possible when the union is stronger, more united and with a growing democratic and solidaristic culture.

The Eat the Rich T-shirt Fain wore to one of the updates embodied the fight of working people against corporate greed. This contract, and the struggle it took to win

round one, is the best motivation for joining a union. The UAW forced the Detroit Three to agree to terms they had no intention of meeting.

## Standing Up

The strategy underpinning the Stand Up Strike is to continuously bargain, pitting one corporation against another and exerting more pressure as each week goes by. While others hoped that all 10 demands could be fully implemented, most workers and labor observers thought winning a few would result in an extraordinary contract.

There may not be many such examples where a union can use one employer against another in negotiations, but escalating a strike and setting deadlines to produce maximum gains is certainly relevant. Announcing the progress of negotiations puts pressure on the corporations and keeps the members informed and eager to do their part.

Central to the organizing at both UPS and the Detroit Three was the call for the membership to shape their demands and prepare for their implementation in innovative of ways. Workers were encouraged to tell their stories so that the broader working class understood and supported their struggle.

During the UAW's strike, trade unions around the world sent message of solidarity and delegations to rallies. Teamster drivers honored the picket lines while the Detroit Three sent their salaried workers across the line to scab. These experiences will hopefully sustain the membership's sense of empowerment, deepen its activism and broaden the bonds of solidarity. All will be critically necessary in the struggles ahead. ■



Unions from all over the world expressed their solidarity with the UAW strikers by sending messages and even delegations to rallies and picket lines.





## 148-Day Strike Ends in Victory: WGA Writers Win

Barry Eidlin interviews Alex O'Keefe & Howard A. Rodman

**Barry Eidlin:** Welcome to Jacobin Radio [broadcast on October 4, 2023]. I'm your guest host Barry Eidlin, filling in today for your regular host, Suzi Weissman. Today, we're digging into one of the most high profile labor struggles of this recent hot labor summer, the strike of more than 11,500 film and television screenwriters, members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA). On September 24th, after 148 days, the WGA negotiating committee announced a tentative agreement with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), the association representing major studios and streamers. They voted unanimously to recommend the agreement. On Wednesday, September 27th, the strike was suspended and writers began returning to work. [On October 9th the contract was ratified. Ninety-five percent of the membership (8,525 ballots cast) voted overwhelmingly to approve the agreement, which runs until May 1, 2026.]

The WGA leadership noted, "This deal is exceptional, with meaningful gains and protections for writers in every sector of the membership." Major media outlets agreed with The New York Times stating that the deal, gives Writer's Guild most of what it wanted." Industry publication Deadline noted, "Big gains for workers." And a headline in The Hollywood Reporter said that, "Many writers see tentative deal as blueprint for Hollywood's future."

When the WGA released the terms of the new tentative agreement, it became clear that the deal did contain major gains for writers, better wages, and improved language on so-called residuals to ensure that writers keep getting paid as studios and streamers keep making money off their work through rebroadcasts.

We have two WGA leaders and activists who have been deeply involved in the contract fight and strike. Alex O'Keefe is a screenwriter and organizer from Gotha, Florida, and a rank-and-file mem-

ber of the Writers Guild of America West. He helped spearhead the campaign for the Green New Deal and was a speechwriter for senators Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey. He has also written for FX's *The Bear*.

Also with me is Howard A. Rodman. He is the past president of the Writers Guild of America West, a professor of screenwriting at USC's School of Cinematic Arts, a member of the National Film Preservation Board and an artistic director of the Sundance Screenwriting Labs. In 2021, he was elected a governor of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and in 2023, an Academy vice president. His notable writing credits include *Savage Grace* with Julianne Moore and Eddie Redmayne and starring Josh Hartnett and David Bowie. Most recently, he was a staff writer on the HBO Max series, *The Idol*, for director Sam Levinson and co-creator of *The Weekend*.

How are you feeling now after five months on the picket line?

**Howard A. Rodman:** It was like being hit on the head with a glorious two by four. Last night I went to the Palladium for the gathering of the Writers Guild of America West. They presented the contract to the membership in this very large crowd. All of a sudden the poignancy, the sense of joy, and the visible manifestation of solidarity that was present crept in and I started to cry.

**Alex O'Keefe:** My entire life, and especially my career, was uprooted by this strike. It's a sacrifice, a necessary sacrifice. And writers like me just got our foot in the door. That sacrifice hits us the hardest. I mean, I have \$63 in my bank account. I didn't know how I was going to keep going. The strike had gone on so long, it felt like as if it would never end.

Actually I knew it would end in our victory but emotionally it felt like it would never end. I was just focusing on how I might



have to shift careers or leave LA and live somewhere cheaper. I wanted to do whatever I could to continue the strike by making a more consistent income.

## The Feel of Victory

I almost didn't believe the headlines until I got the agreement. And when I read through the terms, I was shocked at how much we won. We won for writers of every sector and we won for rank and file writers like myself. You know, I was a staff writer on *The Bear*. In our previous contract, staff writers were paid a weekly rate. If we were assigned to write an episode, we wouldn't get the script fee that writers normally receive, but with our new contract, we will.

Now we'll get a share in the success of our streaming shows. The Guild will receive data of how many people are viewing our shows. That's pretty essential to determine the value of our labor. And the biggest thing that emerged during the strike — and no one knew quite how important it would be — is that we set a new standard on AI and automation.

The strike will affect many coming labor battles, certainly in Hollywood. But also across America, even across the world, because we ensured that AI is not going to replace screenwriters.

If we did not win we would have been replaced in three years. They still might try to screw around with us — you can't trust them. A contract is only as powerful as your enforcement is. It's up to all the members and the Guild to enforce this contract's gains.

This is an historic contract, a new deal for Hollywood. We've seen the extinction of writing across journalism and new media. Those tech bros were coming for us next. And we didn't let them. We put our foot down. They said it was an impossible fight, yet we beat them.

**BE:** *What were the issues that drove writers to strike in the first place? I know Alex that you're a writer on a very successful show. Many people think that would put you in a better position than a lot of other writers, but you were still struggling. What was facing Hollywood writers leading up to the strike?*

**HR:** The change in the business model, from studios and networks to the streaming world, has broken.

If it's not fixed, writers will not have careers, only gigs. If it's not fixed, the thread that was handed down to us from the previous generation — that says you can make a living as a writer — would have snapped. What we said was, "No, not on our watch. That's not going to happen." I always knew that we would win because when we hold together, we win. But I didn't know how long it would take.

## The Hustle

**AO:** For my generation, it's the contradictions of Hollywood that became too extreme. When you're writing your sample script, when you're trying to break into the Guild, the mirage of Hollywood is just a little bit far away. You think, if I could just get that dream job, I'd be secure, I won't have to worry, I won't have to take other jobs.

You know you have to hustle to make it, but you feel that once you make it, then at least you'll have a good union job, you'll be protected. I pursued Hollywood not to become some famous filmmaker, but because I'm from poverty and I'm a writer. I thought this is the one place where I could apply my

craft at a high level, raise a family and have a middle-class life.

I got very lucky. My first professional gig was *The Bear*. I got hired because they were looking for a new voice and didn't think it was going to be a big show. If they had realized that, they probably would have hired a more experienced writer.

There's a lot of new voices in Hollywood right now: people of color, women, people from the working class. We are seeing a boom. I always imagined in watching TV, like any fan, that this creative boom was matched with a boom of valuing workers.

It wasn't a ton of money to be a staff writer, but I thought, "This is it for me. I guess I've made it." And when you're in Hollywood, you're always searching for that moment. Once you actually work the job, you realize, no, it's just another job, it's just another gig. The studios don't incentivize you to make great art, they incentivize you to make content.

Even if you make something like *The Bear*, you don't really get a fair share in the profits. What blew my mind was that all the top showrunners and lead actors were not getting their fair share in their streaming shows.

I wrote for *The Bear* from my tiny Brooklyn apartment. It was a pandemic winter. They didn't fly me out to the writers' room, but I was lucky enough to get in the room and be on Zoom. I'd plug in my space heater and it would knock out all the power. I worked on the last episode from a public library.

The nightmarish conditions radicalized us because we knew there was value in Hollywood. We were not going to believe that Hollywood was broke. We no longer believed if you pulled yourself up by your bootstraps, if you were innovative and hardworking, you'll make it. Even if you get lucky, like me, it's no security.

We realized they're not producing value by making great product but by downsizing. We have to fundamentally shift that trajectory in America to rebuild the middle class and also democratize our workplaces.

Our last strike occurred when George W Bush was president. Now we are in a friendlier labor culture since [Amazon organizer] Chris Smalls, since the pandemic. There is especially youth organizing in the labor movement. It's unionizing Starbucks and Trader Joe's. And that has rippled into Hollywood, where this is a youthful, more militant labor force.

Once you pull down that curtain, you no longer believe in the glitzy glamour of it all. You realize that your power comes from your truth. Your power comes from talking to your co-workers about what's going on in your life, what's really going on in the workplace.

## What Writers Want

**BE:** *What are some of the concrete contract provisions in this new tentative agreement? How do these compare to what the studios were trying to get you to accept initially.*

**HR:** When we started this strike on May 1st, the studios were offering writers \$86 million a year. The tentative agreement is two and a half times as much, at \$233 million. We got 5%, 4% and 3.5% raises on minimums. And given that 50% of the Guild works for minimums, that's significant and it's cumulative.

We got more money for made for TV programs. Feature writers under certain conditions are guaranteed a two-step deal rather than a one-step deal.

**BE:** *What's a two-step deal?*

**HR:** A screenwriter is paid for a draft. This made sense in



an era where it was written in longhand and then somebody typed it up. For decades this has not been a great metric for compensating screenwriting work, but when I started, you would get two- or three-step deals. This meant you did a draft, received notes from the producers and studios and be paid for another draft. Sometimes that would repeat for a third time.

So you got the benefit of their input and the opportunity to be paid for two or possibly three drafts. Starting in 2010, they started switching to one-step deals. But the amount of work didn't decrease. You got notes and then they gave you more notes so you would do as much work for a one-step deal but were paid about 40% less.

The initiation of a one-step deal guaranteed a wild exploitation of your time with mandated free work. It was essential. And it's even more essential because for a long time screenwriters have feared this is a union of television writers. When push comes to shove, our needs will just be sacrificed for the greater good of the television writers' agenda.

What happened was that there were gains for all sectors of the writing community for screenwriters, for comedy variety writers, for staff writers. That's powerful and quietly triumphant.

**BE:** What about residuals?

**HR:** As a result of the 1960 strike — the last strike when writers and actors were both on strike — we won residuals, meaning payment for reuse. It started when theatrical screenwriters found their movies were being shown on TV. It took a long and devastating strike for TV producers to agree. Studios hate paying residuals. As one of the people on the other side who shall remain anonymous said, "I don't pay my plumber every time I flush my toilet."

While president of the Guild, I was on maybe five negotiating committees. By the 2007-08 strike we were able to establish jurisdiction over residuals. We were willing to take a cruddy residual formula just to get a foot in the door. Over the years it's improved a little bit. But streaming residuals have fallen far, far behind the residuals in theatrical [movies] and in series [writing for network/cable TV].

If you're a screenwriter and make a movie for theatrical distribution, you get one set of payments. But if that movie doesn't get streamed, you get far less for its reuse.

We wanted to remedy that — and we did. And we did it for programs with a budget of \$30 million or more. This covers most things on Streaming Video On Demand (ACOD). For video on demand, we got an 18% increase on initial compensation, with a 26% increase in the residual base. Over three years this amounts to an average \$216,000 for screening projects.

## Writing Rooms

**AO:** Writers like myself, on the most precarious edge of the business, haven't fully established ourselves. The new provisions of the contract with screenwriting rooms are often the best way to get experience and a steady job where you get paid every two weeks.

Since the rise of streaming, there's been a mini-room or development-room where you can write a whole season of TV

and it never even airs. They would have fewer writers doing more work over a shorter time period and for less pay.

Now for the first time ever in the contract there's a minimum for how many writers constitutes a writers' room, which is based on its purpose. Just establishing that is huge for future organizing.

Before they found all these different ways to bypass regulations that protect writers. In the tentative agreement you can't just have one writer in the room. And then there was an AI doing the work of six different writers. Now we have established what a showrunner is, what a writers' room is, and minimum staffing levels. That is going to be a generational shift in television writing.

**HR:** I want to tell you why writers' rooms are so important. My dad was a TV writer in a very different era. He wrote on shows like *Naked City* and *Route 66*. A season was 39 episodes of hour-long dramas. There were writers' rooms for comedy, but not for drama.

Drama writing in the early 1960s was done by one or two guys — and I say guys because they were mostly guys — who sat in a room and wrote their own scripts or rewrote scripts that came in from a pool of freelance writers. They were responsible for 39

hours of television a year. By comparison, 39 hours is equivalent to the first three or four seasons of *Succession*.

There was no hiatus because by the time you finished with a season, the next season was right there at your throats. And because there was no writers' room, they had to stay up all night again and again.

My father worked through two minor heart attacks because there were no other shoulders to carry the load. There was only him and a guy named Stirling Silliphant. They had no alternative but to work through injuries.

My dad died of heart disease at age 65. Had there been writers' rooms in those days, he might have lived to see three grandchildren. He might have lived to see all of us live and blossom and have the lives that we have now. Having the regulation around staffing isn't just something that's nice, it creates careers and also preserves the quality and sometimes the quantity of human life.

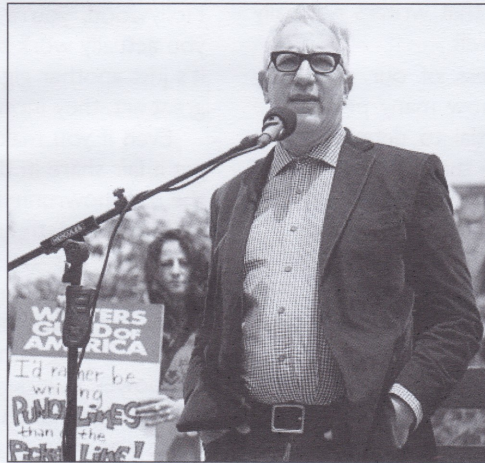
## Confronting the AI Beast

**BE:** I think it's important to let our listeners know what the language says about artificial intelligence and how the contract is going to protect writers.

**AO:** We saved our craft from the machines. It really was humanity versus the machines. And it shows the degradation of our relationship with the executives and power brokers and CEOs that they stopped seeing what we do as an art and start seeing us as coders. They come from tech. Why don't we code better shows?

Why don't we feed all *The Bear* episodes in and then we can write its episodes for generations to come. People could request their own custom season of *The Bear*.

They wanted to erase all authorship. They wanted to be



Howard A. Rodman, addressing a strike rally.



able to feed our scripts into a generative AI to replace us. And if we allowed that to happen, then as I got older there would be no Guild, no long-term vision.

Did they think that this strike was going to land the blow to break the union? It might not have broken apart after this strike, but if they were able to win AI for both writers and actors, we wouldn't have had a union in 10 years. Machines would have been able to steal our copyrighted work, our art forms, our souls. It would have delegitimized our entire craft.

I am so impressed by the level of regulation we've won. This is so new that so many other members of the labor and progressive movements were looking to the Writers Guild and our amazing research department to figure out how to regulate AI to save jobs in the long term. So I'm very proud of these provisions.

**HR:** Alex is absolutely right; the studios see what we do as content. When Warner Bros. Discovery CEO speaks, he speaks of his IPs [Intellectual Properties].

Their larger aim is not unlike the way William Burroughs described the economics of the heroin trade: Don't improve the product, degrade the buyer.

What we won was not an easy win. It was among the very, very last things talked about in the very last two days of negotiation. The writer is not splitting credit with a machine. They can't give you some machine-written thing and then say, "Oh, you're the rewriter on that."

Instead, under the MBA writers [Minimum Basic Agreement, i.e., their contract], if they wish, can elect to use AI when performing writing services. But the company cannot require you to use software. If any material given to you has been generated by AI or incorporates any AI-generated material, they must tell you. Most importantly, our job is not to train AI. In other words, don't scrape our scripts to have a machine, create shit-

tier versions of our scripts.

When talks broke off on May 1st, studios were only offering to meet with us once a year to chat about technology. That was as far as they would go on AI.

When I look at the provisions that we have, it's not perfect. But there are the most essential guardrails around the kind of abuse they were gleefully contemplating when they offered us a once a year sit chat.

**AO:** AI is a beast. It's going to continue to evolve because that's what it does. Even what we're calling AI is not true AI. But I believe in my lifetime we're going to see AI become extremely sophisticated, far more ChatGPT will look like Geocities compared to what we're going to look at in the future. So this is going to be a long-term battle. The struggle against automation and AI will be in contract battle after contract battle.

At the beginning of the contract battle, AI was one of the last provisions to make it into the list of demands. That was because it seemed, even earlier this year, before ChatGPT and Midjourney and Dall-E mini, it seemed far away. Actually I'd written a script about AI in Hollywood that was set in the not too distant future. And then all of a sudden it was just here.

I think all of us were shocked at how quickly and sophisticated AI was at scraping copyrighted art for its own purposes, reproducing without crediting or paying artists. So there is going to be a lot more to do.

It can't just be the labor unions fighting against this. This is intellectual property, right? But it's different if it's our labor power. I'm sure that they also want to replace truck drivers with artificial technology that drives trucks.

This is going to be a fight across every sector of the labor movement. What we won was the first guardrails. Every fight afterwards, from UAW to the Teamsters can build upon it. We can't stop here. But this is an incredible start to the movement

to save humanity in the workplace.

**HR:** That's why it's important to have language about AI in this contract. It was only in 2008 that we finally got jurisdiction over new media, which represented a change in technology. In turn, AI will cause change in the business model.

In 2008 the studios said, "Oh, this new thing; it doesn't make money for us. We don't have a business model for it, don't worry about it." We said, "No, actually we're not stupid, we're worrying about it."

We got jurisdiction over the Internet, over streaming in 2008, and now we have jurisdiction over AI. Both are





of equal and systemic importance.

But it's not just for writers. Imagine what AI can do to the careers of actors and then beyond the entertainment industry. Do we want trucks driven by computers? It is vitally important that we set a precedent over our labor power and the ability to withhold. I hope this will not be just widely used but widely improved upon.

## Broader Gains

**BE:** *Beyond the black and white of the contract language, what are the broader gains you see coming from the strike?*

**HR:** Just this morning, I was in correspondence with somebody who said, "Let's take the lesson of this strike and just say no more free rides. If somebody asks me to do a free pass on a screenplay, I'm not going to do it."

It was a kind of "I am Spartacus" moment when we realized that when we hold together, we win. When we hold the line, they have to step back. We are newly emboldened by what we learned about the power of the community of writers in this strike. We can build upon that not just in terms of what's in the contract language, but in terms of our daily work lives.

"No, I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more. No, I'm not going to do that work for free. No, that's not what writers do. It's your job to pay us for that." There's going to be a wild expansion of that attitude in many large and small corners in our daily lives as writers.

**AO:** The strike is about money. It's about surviving, but it's also about respect. When you hear your employers say that their strategy is to leave you homeless you understand their game plan. These CEOs are not our friends.

They would like to destroy us. The only reason they didn't is because we banded together in solidarity across race and class and gender and ideology. We have a new level of self-respect. We're not going to accept loopholes and degrading working conditions.

There's a Hollywood labor movement now. You hear Lindsay, daughter of the Teamsters and the firebrands, people like me, who was just some guy. There's dozens of strike captains, who have held the line and are now involved in the Guild.

There's new organizing across Hollywood. The Marvel workers have unionized. I just spoke with production assistants planning to unionize. We see ourselves as the agents of our own destiny. We no longer in misery. Misery is a word for what we can't change. There is nothing that empowers and raises the consciousness quite like winning and winning big. So this huge victory, at least for my generation.

There's going to be issues that we can't even predict right now. Just like in 2007, they couldn't have predicted AI would be a major issue with this strike. So we have to stay organized.

We need to see Hollywood unions not as a service to keep our health insurance but as a commitment to co-workers. When you are abused, harassed or exploited, you have a place to go. But the union is only as powerful as the power you put

into it. Now we see that's a consciousness that you cannot erase, especially with this huge win we're celebrating.

**HR:** Absolutely.

## Energy and Persistence

**BE:** *Building on what you're saying, Alex, I was able to make it out to the picket line several times. What really struck me were the*

*high levels of participation and energy I saw on the picket lines, even months into the strike. As a labor scholar, I find as strikes stretch out, they often settle into a kind of routine. The energy level drops, it becomes just a few people around a fire barrel. That was not the case when it came to this strike. Why was that?*

**AO:** You have to credit the strike captains. Dozens of strike captains, many young, who kept people motivated and informed. They knew the issues at hand. One amazing innovation was the themed pickets that made it a party. There was a Beyonce picket, there were reunion pickets of *The Simpsons*.

So the picket wasn't just a walk around or even a place to talk about our grievances. It was let's celebrate who we are. We're writers. We're storytellers. We're the culture makers. The picket was a site of catharsis and celebration that I could have never imagined.

You wanted to go to the picket to see your friend or check out Abbott Elementary doing a picket with the teachers' union (UTLA). The creativity of our union was unleashed on the picket line. That kept people like me coming because we needed that community.

**BE:** *The K-pop picket line I went to at Amazon was great.*

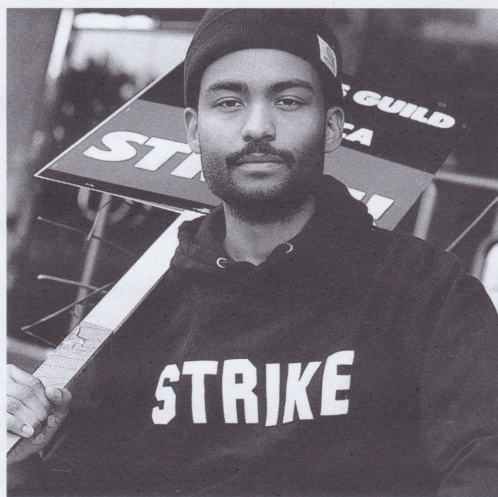
**HR:** When the AMPTP made the cold, callous, calculating decision to spend 100 days away from the negotiating table in hopes that we would soften, they were willing to cause pain and suffering and devastation for tens of thousands of human beings.

It's like Harry Lime in *The Third Man*, gazing down at humanity from the heights of a Ferris wheel over Vienna saying, "Look down there. Tell me, would you really feel any pity if one of those dots stopped moving forever? If I offered you £20,000 for every dot that stopped, would you really, old man, tell me to keep my money? Or would you calculate how many dots you could afford to spare?" That was their philosophy.

We knew it and we felt it. If part of the reason we went back to picket was because it was a lot of fun, another part was that we were not about to let them cause all of that pain, suffering and misery to us, to our communities. We were going to show them that for every day we were on the picket line, as the slogan says, we were able to go one day longer.

**AO:** You can see I have a broken tooth. It looks like I've been in a fight. And I have been. I've been in a 12-round boxing match; I've been beaten down. They bet that if they beat down writers like me, poor and broke staff writers, we would break the strike, but it did the opposite. Round after round, I just went back in there and kept fighting.

I felt I could be homeless, begging for change, and still be on



Alex O'Keefe, writer and activist.



strike until we beat the studio and get our money back. At a certain point you can't break the spirit and that certain fire was ignited early. The more they tried to break us, the more they were unmasked. The more we saw how little respect they had for us, the more self-respect we had for ourselves.

You can't win a fight against somebody who has nothing to lose. I knew that a career under their terms would be no kind of career at all. The only way for us to have a future is if we built it. These people are burning Hollywood to the ground.

## Saving the Industry

We had to save the industry from itself, from the power brokers who had completely lost the thread. We're storytellers. We're able to find the thread and tell the next chapter. We had to write it for them, unfortunately. And it was a hard writing process. And with no notes, 100% no notes!

**HR:** I've been in the Guild since 1988-89, and I've had the good fortune to be working most every year of those years. I'm now on a Writers Guild pension, which is delicious, and it gives me the assurance that I don't have to scramble for jobs that I don't want.

Last year, I took a job as a staff writer. I was getting \$5,185 a week for six weeks on a show with a budget of \$18 million an episode. Compare those two figures. That's what they think writing is worth.

**BE:** How much were you paid?

**HR:** \$5,185 a week, which went up to something like \$5,300 something after May 1st. It's fine if you're getting it every week, 52 weeks a year. But not when you're getting it six weeks a year.

**AO:** When I first got the call for *The Bear* and was going to get \$46,000 I was like "Wow." But then you realize its nine weeks and you have to pay your manager out of that as well. It sounds like a lot but it's not. That's why residuals are so important, that's why having minimum staffing is so important. That's the only way to make this a consistent job.

**BE:** Given how much disrespect the studios were showing you and how much they were digging in their heels to starve you out, why do you think they decided to settle now? What made them come back to the table and agree to a deal?

**HR:** The fact that we weren't going to stop and they knew it.

**AO:** Over the last month of the strike there was a concerted campaign among some elites in Hollywood to break our will. I heard whisper campaigns about myself. I think Matt Belloni, a Hollywood reporter and a former editor, tried to blacklist me.

There were agents in people's ears saying, "Hey, get back to work." I think people like Drew Barrymore fell for it and tried to bring back her show. Bill Maher tried to bring back his show too. We came picketed the hell out of those shows and we shut them down. I guess we needed to give them one last example of our power as America's sweetheart tried to scab. We were not going to let that happen.

I don't know what happened in the negotiating room, but I saw that the attempt to break the union just emboldened people. We showed that the more you try to push us, the harder we push back — and we can push back a lot harder than the 1%. We have the numbers. We produce the value.

Eventually they had to admit that because at the end of the day, they need money. They can try to say, "We're saving

so much money because we're not producing anything." That doesn't mean much to shareholders. Their stocks were in the tank; investors were pissed off.

Ultimately like any other business, you need to keep producing. They had to get a reality check. Eventually they couldn't continue to live in la la land. Workers have the power.

**HR:** Absolutely. That's like McDonald's saying, "Look how much money we're saving by not buying any beef patties." At a certain point they've got to sell something.

I would hope that the victory in our leaving no sector of our union behind helps SAG-AFTRA achieve a contract that addresses their needs as this one addresses ours. We are helping the labor movement realize something: when we hold the line, we win. Workers have to receive a just and proportionate share of the wealth that our labor creates. Without that we don't work. And without that, they don't work.

## Nobody Left Behind

**BE:** This is far from the end of the labor struggles that are going on in Hollywood right now. We've still got the SAG-AFTRA TV and film actors on strike. It looks like the video game voice motion stunt actors could be joining them very soon — they had a 98% strike authorization vote. And then as Alex noted, a lot of the invisible workers who make all of Hollywood run, represented by the Teamsters and IATSE, are negotiating their contracts next year.

**HR:** The winds are at our back internationally, nationally and in this town. I would hope that SAG-AFTRA would see what we did as something to build upon, not as a one off. I would love to be in a position where three years from now, when we're negotiating our next contract, we are trying to incorporate some of the gains that they have gained in the interim.

This 2023 strike came out of a decade or more of union organizing. But for a long time, various sectors of the Guild thought the pattern of demands was tilted toward the wealthiest showrunners. The thinking went that if they get what they wanted, something might trickle down to the rest of us.

In this negotiation, we said "Nobody gets left behind." Unless there's something for comedy variety writers, daytime writers, writers of theatrical features, writing teams, and staff writers, then all of us will keep picketing.

At first some members didn't quite believe it. Who would be thrown under the bus at the end of the day? And certainly the bosses didn't believe it because they've never seen that from us before. They'd always thought, "Okay, we'll give them this and then we don't have to give them anything else." This time they did have to come up with everything.

We just kept walking the line. And the enthusiasm of the line on the very last day of the strike was no smaller or less enthusiastic than on the very first day.

At a certain point Wall Street just told the studios to shut up and make a deal. Or maybe they were able to iron out their differences. They do have very different business models so what's good for Sony is bad for Netflix.

For whatever reasons, they were able to give us what we needed. Do we need to build on it? Absolutely.

Do other unions need to take the ball we're going to hand them and run with it? Yep. Will they do that with our fullest support? Yep. This strike feels like the beginning of a story and not the end of one. ■





New York City retirees give thumbs down to Medicare Disadvantage.

## Medicare and Veterans Health Care: Parallel Fights Vs. Privatization By Steve Early & Suzanne Gordon

WHEN POWERFUL PRIVATE interests obtain new profit-making opportunities feeding off of public programs, it becomes very hard to reverse the process. The parallel struggles over corporate profiteering that has undermined federally funded healthcare for 62 million seniors and nine million military veterans illustrate the political challenges involved — for labor, healthcare reformers, and the broader left.

At stake in both anti-privatization fights is the future of existing single-payer systems as a working model for future tax-supported medical coverage for all Americans.

If the ongoing assault on traditional Medicare and the public healthcare system operated by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is successful, “Medicare for All” will become much harder, if not impossible, to achieve. And our best example of real “socialized medicine” in the United States, the VA, will be defunded, discredited and dismantled as well.

Corporate Democrats and conservative Republicans in Congress and policy-makers in the Bush, Obama, Trump, and now Biden Administrations have brought these political threats to the tipping point. To make matters worse, some of the advocacy organizations ostensibly devoted to the best interests of constituencies adversely affected by privatization are now embracing the trend instead of mobilizing against it.

Among those letting their members down are some major public sector unions, retiree organizations, and Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) like the American Legion and

Veterans of Foreign Wars, which in the past have been stronger defenders of the VA.

For single payer activists in the labor movement, this feels like *déjà vu* all over again. Past disagreements between unions, over the desirability of replacing job-based medical coverage for active workers with national health insurance, now take the form of internal disputes between some unions and their own retirees over whether the latter should be herded into private insurer-run “Medicare Advantage” plans, rather than the more cost-effective traditional Medicare coverage they prefer.

Organized labor’s mistaken embrace of Medicare Advantage plans has helped the healthcare industry convince millions of consumers that they will save money and get additional benefits if they switch to them.

### Bipartisan Privatization Project

Creating “market competition” for Medicare patients or those getting direct care at the VA has been a corporate-backed bipartisan project that got its greatest boost under the presidencies of George W. Bush and Donald Trump. When Democrats like Barack Obama or Joe Biden seek the White House, they may criticize the policies of their Republican predecessors or rivals but, once elected, don’t diverge much from them.

For example, during a 2008 presidential debate, Obama sharply disagreed with Senator John McCain over the merits of the “Medicare Modernization Act of 2003.” McCain strongly applauded this Bush initiative; his Democratic Party opponent denounced partial privatization as a costly and wasteful scheme, not beneficial to tax-payers or Medicare recipients.

Once in office, Obama forgot about his debate pledge to end Medicare Advantage. He focused instead on getting the

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Affordable Care Act (aca) passed, albeit without any “public option” that would have created unwanted competition for the private insurers benefitting from the ACA’s expansion of federally subsidized healthcare coverage.

By the end of Obama’s eight years in the White House, Medicare Advantage plans had greater “market share” than ever before. New Trump Administration appointees then gave them a further boost. “Despite having overhead costs almost seven times that of traditional Medicare (13.7 versus 2 percent), Medicare Advantage plans have grown rapidly,” *The Nation* reported in 2019. “They now cover more than one-third of Medicare beneficiaries, up from 13 percent in 2005.”<sup>1</sup>

During Joe Biden’s first year in office, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) continued to facilitate the movement of millions of Medicare beneficiaries “into mostly commercial, for-profit plans, called Direct Contracting Entities,” that would “further waste taxpayer money” and “fully privatize Medicare,” according to Physicians for a National Health Program.<sup>2</sup>

Like Obama before him, Biden has failed to restore the primacy of “original Medicare.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, his administration has replaced Trump’s DCE’s with what PNHP calls “a nearly identical program, called ACO REACH.” As a result, about 31 million Americans — about half of all Medicare recipients — are now covered by Medicare Advantage plans.

## Outsourcing VA Care

Six years after John McCain lost to Obama, he helped open the door for privatization of the nation’s largest public health-care system — the network of hospitals and clinics operated by the VA. McCain and Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate defeated by Obama in 2012, both favored a Cato Institute plan to replace VA-delivered care with vouchers that veterans could take to any private doctor or hospital, who would then get Medicare-style reimbursement from the government.

In 2014, McCain insisted that any big Obama Administration increase in funding and staffing for VA direct care be accompanied by an experiment in outsourcing treatment in places where VA wait times for appointments were too long. (The VA had always referred patients outside its own system, based on medical need, when in-house care was not available.)

The resulting compromise with McCain — brokered with then Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chair Bernie Sanders — resulted in passage to the Veterans Choice Act of 2014. It did provide much-needed funding for VA’s national network of 171 medical centers and 1,112 outpatient sites.

But the Choice Act also opened the door for diverting billions of dollars from the VA’s direct care budget to pay private doctors and for-profit hospitals to treat veterans at greater cost and with less effectiveness.<sup>4</sup>

When Choice Act provisions related to outsourcing were due to expire, a Democrat was no longer in the White House and the Veterans Affairs Committee was now chaired by Senator John Tester (D-MT) rather than a strong VA defender like Sanders.

Tester worked with Republican allies and fellow corporate Democrats to hand Donald Trump one of his biggest bipartisan victories — the VA MISSION Act of 2018. Critics like Sanders predicted, accurately, that it would lead to “the draining, year after year, of much-needed resources from the VA,” setting the

stage for hospital closings and disruption of a highly integrated system of coordinated care.

During his 2020 run for the presidency, Joe Biden dutifully echoed this critique. He accused Trump of trying “to privatize and dismantle the VA” and pledged that he would never “defund” the nation’s largest public health care system, whose nine million patients get treatment that is “specialized, supportive, and second to none.”

Despite Biden’s campaign vow not to “de-fund” the VA, during his first year in office, \$18 billion — or 20 percent of the agency’s entire clinical care budget — was used to reimburse private medical practices, for-profit hospital chains, and other outside contractors.

In March, 2022 his Secretary for Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough unveiled a VA restructuring plan so drastic that even Tester and others on the Veterans Affairs Committee refused to confirm a Biden-nominated “Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission” that was ready to approve McDonough’s facility closing recommendations.

In June of that year, McDonough informed the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee that outsourcing was now costing his agency more than \$30 billion dollars a year, nearly one third of the VA’s entire direct care budget.

This growth rate — a seven percent increase over the previous fiscal year — was not sustainable. It would soon result in nearly half of all veterans’ care being delivered outside their own system, a tipping point which McDonough warned “threatens to harm the VA’s training, research, and emergency preparedness missions.”

At the same time, McDonough stuck to his neoliberal insistence that the VA and its outside contractors are engaged in a “healthy competition to be the best, most accessible highest quality option” for patients. As a result, he refused — and still refuses — to revise the Trump-era patient referral rules, promulgated under the MISSION Act, that have opened the floodgates for outsourcing.

## The Downside of Privatization

Former Communications Workers of America researcher Matthew Cunningham-Cook has done a series of investigative reports for *The Lever* documenting the downsides of what critics now call “Medicare Disadvantage” plans.<sup>5</sup>

As Cunningham-Cook explains, the Medicare system was set up to make set payments directly to healthcare providers. It “was founded on the principle that seniors should get the care they need without an insurer middleman.” In contrast, Medicare Advantage plans utilize “provider networks that force patients to choose health care providers selected by the insurance company, or else they face potentially enormous financial penalties.”

As Cunningham-Cook points out, these “private insurers have an inherent incentive to deny care. The less medical attention they provide beneficiaries, the more government money they can pocket as profits.”

As a cost control measure, Medicare Advantage plans require pre-authorization for many services. A February, 2023 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that two million prior authorization requests had been denied by Medicare Advantage plans in 2021, more than triple the denials just two years earlier.



A report last year by the Department of Health and Human Services' own inspector general found that such plans had wrongly denied 1.5 million payment claims — 18% of the total — in 2019.

Traditional Medicare only covers about 80 percent of care costs. So nearly all Medicare patients purchase “Medigap” coverage — or have such supplementary coverage on a group basis, often as union retirees.

As Cunningham-Cook reports, due to a loophole in federal law, Medigap plan providers in most states “are allowed to reject patients or discriminate against them by charging them far higher premiums on the basis of preexisting conditions *after* they have elected for a Medicare Advantage plan.... So once a patient enters the Medicare Advantage system, they typically cannot afford to leave.”

As one healthcare economist told *The New York Times* last year, “The whole idea of Medicare Advantage was supposedly to give people more choice, not less...It really takes away choice.”<sup>6</sup>

The VA system — before the Choice and MISSION Acts — was a true outlier in U.S. health care, providing high-quality care to a patient population predominantly poor and working class. Like caregivers employed by the National Health Service in Britain, VA doctors, nurses, therapists and other professional and nonprofessional staff are salaried and mission driven. They don't work for investor-owned hospital chains or medical practices which get reimbursed by private insurers, Medicare or Medicaid on a “fee for service” basis, which often leads to fragmented and uncoordinated care.

The VA has about 120,000 union members, making it one of the most heavily unionized healthcare networks in the country. One third of the VA's 300,000 staff members are veterans themselves. This helps create a unique culture of empathy and solidarity between patients and providers that has no counterpart in American medicine.

The VA plays a critical “teaching hospital” role in training tens of thousands of new doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals. As demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic, the VA during local or national crisis situations also serves as a backup system to private healthcare facilities overwhelmed by their civilian patient load.

Even Secretary McDonough's own reports to Congress confirm what many scientific studies have long documented: “VA direct care has been consistently shown to outperform most private sector hospitals in core measures of inpatient quality of care.”<sup>7</sup> McDonough also acknowledges that veterans “trust the VA to provide equal or better care than the community” and “find accessing direct care easier than accessing community care.”

Has incremental privatization of the VA, since 2015, improved veterans' healthcare delivery in any way? According to McDonough himself, some patients “are driving further or waiting longer for that care than they would if V.A. provided that care ... Veterans are also experiencing fragmentation of care, duplicative testing, and unnecessary and improper billing from community providers.”

Thousands of VA staffers hired to treat patients have been forced to become managers of non-VA care that is costlier and less effective, and often requires longer waits than if patients had remained in-house.<sup>8</sup>

A recent RAND report confirmed that the quality of outsourced care is difficult for VA staff to monitor.<sup>9</sup> Outside providers, who now number 1.2 million, are eager to be paid promptly but are often slow to provide documentation of their services or share necessary information with in-house care coordinators.

## Feeding at the Trough (And Helping Them Do it)

Some VA contractors have definitely engaged in fraudulent billing practices, according to the agency's Office of the Inspector General (OIG).<sup>10</sup> In FY2020, the VA was billed for nearly \$80 million in medical services that were never actually provided or whose cost was inflated through the fraudulent billing practice known as “up-coding.”

As part of the privatization process, the VA has also paid billions to two private insurance companies, TriWest and Optum, a subsidiary of UnitedHealth Group, to serve as third-party administrators of its MISSION Act-mandated network of outside providers.

When TriWest along with another private insurer, Health Net, served as the third-party administrator for the predecessor program created by the Choice Act, the OIG found that the two companies were responsible for improper billing of their own.<sup>11</sup>

Health Net, owned by a Medicare Advantage plan provider called Centene, had to repay the federal government nearly \$100 million. TriWest had to return \$179.7 million because of its overcharging,<sup>12</sup> yet that didn't stop Trump appointees (and now Biden's) from continuing to use the firm as an outsourcing network administrator.

Medicare Advantage plans engage in similar billing fraud and financial abuse on a much larger scale. Their backers include firms like UnitedHealth, an insurer worth \$450 billion, which is already feeding at the VA privatization trough. UnitedHealth made more than \$14 billion in profits in 2022, while the other three largest for-profit Medicare Advantage insurers earned an additional \$10 billion.

According to a Kaiser Family Foundation study, these firms generate twice as much gross profit from their Advantage plan business as from their sale of other types of insurance. Last year, Humana<sup>13</sup> generated more than 80 percent of its revenue from five million Medicare Advantage customers. Yet as the *Times* reported:

*“Eight of the 10 biggest Medicare Advantage insurers — representing more than two-thirds of the market — have submitted inflated bills, according to federal audits. And four of the five largest players — UnitedHealth, Humana, Elevance, and Kaiser — have faced federal lawsuits alleging that efforts to over diagnose their customers crossed the line into fraud.”<sup>14</sup>*

In 2020, this “upcoding” drained \$12 billion from the Medicare Trust fund. According to PNHP's latest study of Medicare Advantage plans, based on 2022 federal spending on them, over-billing is now costing U.S. taxpayers between \$88 billion and \$140 billion each year. Even the group's lower estimate is a sum large enough to add dental, hearing, and vision benefits to traditional Medicare, an improvement that would benefit every American over 65.<sup>15</sup>

Given the political clout of big healthcare insurers, it's no surprise that Medicare Advantage remains popular with



a bipartisan majority in Congress. Just last year, 80% of all House members signed a letter declaring they were “ready to protect the program from policies that would undermine it” — despite little action by the Biden Administration to better regulate the Medicare Advantage market and its many deceptive practices.

The industry’s bamboozling of seniors and rip-offs of the U.S. Treasury have, unfortunately, been aided and abetted by consumer and labor groups which partner with Medicare Advantage plan providers, and share in their profits.

The biggest offender is the AARP (formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons), which claims to have 38 million dues paying members. In 2021, as a result of its lucrative partnerships with UnitedHealth and other for-profit firms, the AARP collected \$814 million in “royalties” — an amount twice its dues revenue that year, according to an analysis by Mathew Cunningham-Cook.<sup>16</sup>

Last year the national AFL-CIO<sup>17</sup> began advertising its own “Medicare Advantage group plans...available exclusively to retired union members” via the “comprehensive coverage” provided by Anthem, a giant private insurer. Like the AARP, the Alliance for Retired Americans,<sup>18</sup> a much smaller retiree group linked to the AFL-CIO, has avoided any public criticism of Medicare Advantage plan problems.

Among national veterans’ organizations, a similar betrayal of the interests of members dependent on VA care has occurred over the past decade, as some of these groups have become more dependent on corporate largesse.

Veterans Service Organizations — including the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, AMVETS and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) — welcomed the Choice Act of 2014. Four years later — despite mounting evidence that outsourcing was undermining the VA — they backed the even more damaging MISSION Act of 2018.

As we document in a new book *Our Veterans*, the “corporatization of veterans affairs” is personified by IAVA, which has supplemented its very limited dues income with Wall Street donors like TriWest and Cerner Corp.,<sup>19</sup> the recipient of a troubled \$16 billion VA contract awarded by President Trump.

Another IAVA benefactor is Cigna, the giant private insurer whose foundation received one of IAVA annual Corporate Leadership Awards. Other past IAVA donors include the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America and several of its affiliated biotechnology firms.

Not to be outdone by IAVA, AMVETS has partnered with



*Workers demanding fair practices at the VA (2018).*

Humana, the nation’s third largest for-profit insurer. Both Cigna and Humana have been implicated in Medicare Advantage plan abuses.

## Who is Pushing Back

The AFL-CIO’s embrace of Medicare Advantage has aroused the ire of longtime single-payer activists, a growing number of central labor bodies, and, most importantly rank-and-file groups like the NYC Organization of Public Service Retirees, which opposes a top-level labor-management deal putting 250,000 pensioners in a for-profit Medicare Advantage Plan run by Aetna.

Ed Grystar, a former labor council president in Western Pennsylvania and healthcare union contract negotiator, is one of many “Medicare for All” advocates who’ve been forced to wage a defensive fight on behalf of Medicare, as championed by the AFL-CIO in the mid-1960s.

Says Grystar: “Even as labor negotiations continue to be inhibited by rising healthcare costs, labor refuses to expose the corruption and waste within the ongoing privatization of Medicare, harming its members, reducing union credibility, and contributing to the downward spiral of health benefits for all.”

As he reports, state and/or local labor federations in New York, Vermont, Maine, Washington, Kentucky, Texas, and California have passed resolutions or joined petitions against privatizing the administration of Medicare benefits.<sup>20</sup>

The Labor Campaign for Single Payer has sounded the alarm as well, and urged its affiliates to remind AFL-CIO President Liz Schuler and President Biden that “Medicare provides bedrock coverage for retired and disabled union members and serves as a template for fulfilling labor’s historic commitment to making healthcare a right for everyone.” But as Labor Campaign co-chair Mark Dudzic warns, “allowing insurance companies and hedge fund managers to be the gate-keepers for retiree healthcare is a recipe for disaster.”

Nobody has organized against this “disaster” more aggressively than retired union members in New York City like Marianne Pizzitola, a former Fire Department Emergency



Medical Services staffer. She agrees that "labor should never support privatizing healthcare or stripping retirees of vested earned benefits."

That's why Pizzitola helped create the Public Service Retiree group that has tried to prevent AFSCME District Council 37, the New York United Federation of Teachers, and other city unions from scrapping what *Labor Notes* calls "the best retiree health coverage in the country."<sup>21</sup>

In the course of this ongoing struggle, hundreds of retirees have filed lawsuits, marched and protested, made creative use of social media, enlisted City Council allies, and targeted Medicare Advantage plan promoters like NYC Mayor Eric Adams.

As healthcare policy expert and retired City University professor Len Rodberg explained earlier this year: "The city has taken a hardball position that it won't negotiate new contracts until the unions same them \$600 million by moving forward with Medicare Advantage plans."

While union heavyweights in New York City embraced privatization, the much smaller Vermont State Employees Association (VSEA) waged a model campaign against Republican Governor Phil Scott's unilateral attempt to steer 10,000 retired state workers into Medicare Advantage plans.

The governor claimed that the state and retirees would together save \$9 million a year, while keeping the same level of coverage and paying smaller Medi-gap coverage premiums.<sup>22</sup>

By educating and mobilizing active and retired members, and enlisting support from a Democratic-controlled state legislature, the VSEA succeeded in blocking Scott's move earlier this year. "We want to maintain collective bargaining [over this issue] and not privatize this benefit out to an industry that is renowned for denying healthcare services to people when they need them the most," said VSEA Executive Director Steve Howard.

The unions representing more than 300,000 VA employees threatened by privatization include the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), National Nurses United, the IAM-affiliated National Federation of Federal Employees, NAGE/SEIU, and SEIU Local 200 in upstate New York. They came together most effectively in March, 2022 to resist the Biden Administration's abortive VA facility closing plan.

The proposed downsizing of hospitals and clinics across the country triggered strong grassroots resistance from VA caregivers, their patients, some veterans' groups, and elected officials in cities and states threatened with a reduction in medical services.

Union members and their community allies, like Veterans for Peace, organized rallies, press conferences and picket lines demanding improvements in VA staffing and infrastructure, not layoffs and hospital closures. They highlighted the threat to jobs and healthcare access in rural areas with few private sector alternatives to VA care.

The adverse impact of costly and unnecessary outsourcing was documented more recently in an AFGE-backed report called *Disadvantaging the VA: How VA Staff View Agency Privatization and other Detrimental Policies*. Based on a survey of several thousand VA caregivers and interviews with their patients, this 2023 study warned that veterans' hospitals and

clinics remained understaffed, deprived of resources, and, in some cases, at risk of being closed.<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, even AFGE — the largest federal employee union and most active campaigner against VA privatization -- has bought into the AFL-CIO's promotion of a "Member Benefit Medicare Advantage" plan.

This contradictory union stance angered Robert Bonner and Colleen Evans, two retired VA nurses and former AFGE local presidents in Pittsburgh. In an open letter to AFGE President Everett Kelly and other national executive board members, they urged the union to stop promoting Medicare Advantage plan enrollment.

"The waste, fraud, and corruption of the insurance industry are well documented," Bonner and Evans wrote. "These are the same forces seeking privatization of the VA and not an entity we should embrace. As a public employee union, we should consistently defend and promote the growth of the public sector."

They received no response from AFGE headquarters.

### Political Solution or Stealth Agenda?

Over the past three years, PNHP and other healthcare reform groups have enlisted progressives in Congress, like U.S. Rep Pramila Jayapal,<sup>24</sup> in their grassroots efforts to pressure the Biden Administration to save Medicare from further privatization.

Last October, two House progressives Ro Khanna (D-CA) and Mark Pocan (D-WI) introduced the "Save Medicare Act." This legislation would bar private insurers from using the word "Medicare" in their often deceptive marketing of Medicare Advantage products.

"Only Medicare is Medicare," Pocan argues. "It's one of the most popular and important services the government provides. We should be working to expand this service to include dental, vision, and hearing care...rather than allowing 'Medicare Advantage' programs to provide pale alternatives to what Medicare does."

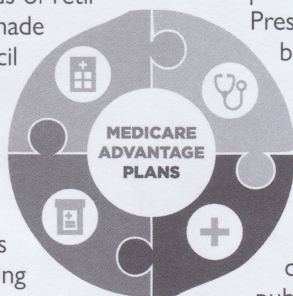
Faced with an industry-backed lobbying and advertising blitz, the Biden Administration opted instead for a three-year phase in of minor reforms of the Medicare Advantage program. Jayapal criticized this April, 2023 decision because it doesn't "stop price gouging by insurance companies," immediately.

"It's now clear that Medicare Advantage is simply a profiteering venture that hurts patient care," Jayapal says. "Without a complete overhaul, it will be impossible to stop bad actors. These plans have spent years scamming seniors and overcharging the government to pad their own profits."

On the veterans' healthcare front, Biden's Secretary of Veterans Affairs has been even more timid than his Health and Human Services Secretary about rewriting Trump-era administrative rules that facilitate profiteering.

Denis McDonough has had three years to revise patient referral standards developed by his pro-privatization predecessor, under the VA MISSION Act of 2018. Now his failure to do so has given a coalition of corporate Democrats and conservative Republicans in Congress the opportunity to pass the Veterans' Health Empowerment, Access, Leadership, and Transparency for Our Heroes (HEALTH) Act.

This measure could codify Trump's VA outsourcing rules and make them reversible only by statute. If enacted this fall,



Don't be switched  
— beware  
of Medicare  
Disadvantage!



the HEALTH Act<sup>25</sup> would force the VA to divert an even bigger share of its \$128 billion annual budget from direct care to Medicare-style reimbursement of private-sector doctors and hospitals.

Sadly, the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars have both signed on as HEALTH Act endorsers,<sup>26</sup> even though — in their official statements — neither favors privatization, and the VFW has, in the past, objected to the outsourcing guidelines that may now become much harder to repeal.

VA healthcare and Medicare have been partially privatized under the guise of saving money and giving seniors and military veterans more “choice.” But the corporate interests and right-wing politicians which favor privatization have a hidden agenda, which is to undermine both of these tax-supported programs.

By disrupting the federal government’s ability to provide direct care to veterans or public insurance coverage for 62 million Americans in a cost-effective manner, they hope to discredit “government run healthcare” in any form.

As Paul Sullivan, a Gulf War combat veteran and former deputy secretary of the California Department of Veterans Affairs, points out, “The forces against quality healthcare for all Americans know that a fully funded and staffed VA would set a shining example for the national healthcare they bitterly oppose.”

Likewise, a well-run Medicare program — not yet saddled with unnecessary costs and tainted by private insurer involvement — was long our best advertisement for “Medicare for All.” Defenders of the VA and traditional Medicare now face an uphill fight to prevent each form of single payer healthcare

from becoming an engendered species in the United States, rather than a model for universal access to affordable care. ■

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## Guatemala: Coup Instead of an Inauguration?

AFTER GUATEMALA’S June 25 election, marred by the disqualification of several leading candidates, a runoff was held on August 20. Anti-corruption candidate Bernardo Arévalo captured 58% of the vote in a landslide. Former diplomat and son of a previous president, Juan José Arévalo, finds his mildly progressive program fiercely opposed by a corrupt and bold right. They seek to block any attempt to account for the state’s horrendous crimes during the civil war. Arévalo is slated to take office January 14 along with 23 candidates elected by his party, the *Movimineto Semilla* (*Semilla* — meaning Seed), who were also elected.

Since Arévalo came in second last June, the corrupt network of current politicians have attempted to reverse the election by claiming *Semilla* committed voter registration fraud. In early October, Guatemala’s highest court upheld a move by prosecutors to suspend Arévalo’s political party.

### What’s Behind the Maneuvers

The most up-front political rightwing and corrupt actors are President Alejandro Giammattei and Attorney General Maria Consuelo Porras. Two years ago Porras dismissed the head of the special prosecutor’s office against impunity, Juan Francisco Sandoval, who

subsequently left the country to protect his life.

That was just the beginning of Porras’ investigations on judges, lawyers and prosecutors working on anti-corruption cases. Several former investigators of the Special Prosecutor’s Office against Impunity and the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala were arrested the following year and forced into exile or continually harassed.

This misuse of government powers was also evident as the Supreme Electoral Tribunal denied the registration of some parties, while approving the registration of others, despite indications that some were tied to drug trafficking groups or they were constitutionally ineligible.

The Public Ministry, the Supreme Court of Justice and the Constitutional Court were complicit in working together to consolidate authoritarian control over the country, all in the interest of corrupt layers of society. This elite maintains political and economic control at the expense of the majority.

In response Indigenous leaders announced



September 25, 2023 demonstration.

Prensa Comunitaria

an indefinite national strike. Civil society organizations, unions, students, peasants, urban collectives, Indigenous and ancestral authorities, neighbors from different neighborhoods of the country set up roadblocks and organized demonstrations.

These will continue until until the two accede to the demands. Porras has called on Guatemalan authorities to “forcibly” act against the “illegal” protests. Giammattei condemned the protests and deployed Guatemala’s riot police to clear the streets. By the beginning of November, with two months to go, two protestors have been killed. ■



## From Ukraine to Palestine and Beyond: Consistent Anti-Imperialism

By Solidarity

[THIS RESOLUTION WAS adopted by the 2023 national convention of Solidarity, convened over the August 18-20 weekend.]

SOCIALISTS, AND REVOLUTIONARY Marxists especially, support oppressed peoples' and nations' struggles for liberation and self-determination. It's important from the outset to clarify that our support is based on the *fundamental democratic legitimacy of these struggles in their own right, and on the broader liberating possibilities that they may open up*. Our support is not dependent on which imperialist power or "camp" is the specific oppressor.

It's a basic principle of anti-imperialist politics that "our main enemy is at home," meaning in our case of course United States imperialism and its allies, with all the monstrous crimes against humanity perpetrated by U.S. policies, in our name. That has never meant seeing "the other side," e.g. today's powers of China or Russia as the United States' main imperial rivals, as "progressive" in any sense or viewing their crimes as a lesser evil or simply a response to U.S. "provocation."

It should be unnecessary to repeat this basic principle. The need to do so is symptomatic of the regrettable condition of much of the left. Since Barack Obama replaced George W. Bush, the biggest problem in the broad left has been the tacit or overt support of many liberals and social-democrats for the imperialist policies championed by the Democratic Party. This continues even as parts of the Democrats' voter base, particularly among young people, are increasingly angered by U.S. support for Israel's brutal war against the Palestinian people.

Further left an inverted problem has arisen — tacit or overt support for the actions of Russian imperialism, in the name of opposition to U.S. imperialism. We began to observe this problem acutely in the tragic course of the Syrian people's uprising, when parts of the U.S. left covered up for the Assad regime's poison gas and terror bombing of the population and the pivotal role of Russia and Iran in keeping that regime in power.

**T**he crisis for the anti-imperialist left has exploded in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, unleashing a war that continues with no short-term end in sight. This is an openly annexationist invasion with a genocidal trajectory, which the Ukrainian people are resisting for the survival of their nation. Some elements on the left — although small — openly side with Russia on the absurd pretext that Ukraine is "fascist" or "provoked" the war (the element of truth here is that Ukraine "provoked" the conflict by refusing to join Vladimir Putin's "Novorossiia" project). Such "campist" leftists increasingly converge with (much larger) far-right forces in opposing support for Ukraine's war of national defense.

A larger portion of the peace movement, horrified by the destruction, loss of life, ecocidal damage and the dire conse-

quences for Global South food supplies — even a supposed imminent danger of escalation to nuclear war — oppose military aid to Ukraine in the name of calling for "immediate cease-fire and negotiations" to end the war. In this "peace" appeal, the desires of the Ukrainian people count for little or nothing. Their struggle is dismissed as a "proxy war" waged by the United States and NATO.

Still others on the left do understand the imperialist character of Russia's invasion, and support Ukraine's right to defend itself, but oppose actual western military aid -- on the grounds that it makes the war an "inter-imperialist conflict," even though U.S./NATO powers and Russia are carefully avoiding direct confrontation. This reduces Ukraine's right of self-defense to an other-worldly abstraction. (Within the U.S. left we're referring here, for example, to the Reform and Revolution DSA caucus.)

As *consistent rather than selective anti-imperialists*, we fully understand that U.S./NATO military aid to Ukraine is based on the interests of the western powers, not on supporting "democracy against authoritarianism" or other pretenses. The crimes of U.S. imperialism, the dominant global power — in Latin America, in full support of Israel's war on the Palestinian people and complicity with the most brutal Middle Eastern dictatorships like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and so much more — continue unabated. None of this negates *Ukraine's right to receive military aid from anywhere it can*.

As the war's horrific costs and catastrophic global effects become worse by the week, and its length and outcome more uncertain, the debates within the left and peace movements will become more intense.

Solidarity supports the Ukraine Solidarity Network (U.S.) in building support for Ukraine's legitimate war against Russia's invasion; in demanding both the immediate withdrawal of Russian occupation forces and the cancellation of Ukraine's crippling and unpayable foreign debt; and most important, supporting and magnifying the voices of progressive and left Ukrainian forces in resisting their own government's anti-labor and neoliberal policies while actively participating in the war effort. These solidarity efforts will remain necessary after the war ends. Building solidarity with the Ukrainian Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement) is particularly vital.

**N**othing can better illustrate the hypocritical double standards of U.S. imperialism than its continued funding and diplomatic support of the Israeli state's ethnic-cleansing and annexationist assaults on the population of the Occupied Palestinian Territories and, increasingly, within Israel's borders as well. The State Department's feeble bleats of "disapproval" of the most visible Israeli settler violence, as well as the deliberate sniper murder of Palestinian-American reporter Shireen



Abu Akleh, only serve to cover up daily abuses and atrocities that aren't caught on camera.

That's why it's all the more important for us now, as part of the pro-Palestine solidarity movement, to support the BDS campaign; to oppose all U.S. military aid to Israel; to condemn and resist the attempts to criminalize as "antisemitic" Palestinian voices speaking out on Israeli settler colonialism; and to support all progressive initiatives in Congress around Israel's incarceration of Palestinian children and its use of U.S.-supplied weapons in committing violations of humanitarian and international law.

The hypocrisy of imperialism and colonialism may have been an important new discovery when it was first said, a couple centuries ago, that the British empire had "no permanent friends, only permanent interests." That is as true now as it ever was, and it's no more an excuse for opposing Ukrainian self-determination today than it was for dismissing any other oppressed nation's resistance to colonial subjugation — whether by Britain, France or other European powers historically, the present U.S. "superpower," or any aspiring imperial rival now.

We need to develop a much deeper understanding of very real and growing new imperialist rivalries, especially between



lapse to the survival of vulnerable populations and of human civilization itself.

Our analysis must seek to be both global and, at the same time, specific and concrete in regard to specific struggles whether in Ukraine, or Palestine, or anywhere else including in our own society. ■

### A few selected references:

On the denials of Palestinian and Ukrainian nationhood, see David Finkel's article, "From Ukraine to Palestine: The Poisons of Denialism," *ATC* 224.

On China's imperial dynamic in action, see "Peripheries of Chinese Imperialism: Belt & Road Initiative in Jamaica" by Rob Connell, *ATC* 224.

On the Green Party's debate on Ukraine, see Howie Hawkins' article in *ATC* 225.

See the Ukraine Solidarity Network mission statement and links at <https://linktr.ee/ukrainesolidaritynetwork>.

## Ukrainian Letter of Solidarity with Palestinian People

WE, UKRAINIAN RESEARCHERS, artists, political and labour activists, members of civil society stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine who for 75 years have been subjected and resisted Israeli military occupation, separation, settler colonial violence, ethnic cleansing, land dispossession and apartheid.

We write this letter as people to people. The dominant discourse on the governmental level and even among solidarity groups that support the struggles of Ukrainians and Palestinians often creates separation. With this letter we reject these divisions, and affirm our solidarity with everyone who is oppressed and struggling for freedom.

As activists committed to freedom, human rights, democracy and social justice, and while fully acknowledging power differentials, we firmly condemn attacks on civilian populations — be they Israelis attacked by Hamas or Palestinians attacked by the Israeli occupation forces and armed settler gangs.

Deliberate targeting of civilians is a war crime. Yet this is no justification for the collective punishment of Palestinian people, identifying all residents of Gaza with Hamas and the indiscriminate use of the term "terrorism" applied to the whole Palestinian resistance. Nor is this a justification of continuation of the ongoing occupation. Echoing multiple UN resolutions, we know that there will be no lasting peace without justice for the Palestinian people.

On October 7 we witnessed Hamas'

violence against the civilians in Israel, an event that is now singled out by many to demonize and dehumanize Palestinian resistance altogether. Hamas, a reactionary Islamist organization, needs to be seen in a wider historical context and decades of Israel encroaching on Palestinian land, long before this organization came to exist in the late 1980s. During the *Nakba* ("catastrophe") of 1948, more than 700,000 Palestinians were brutally displaced from their homes, with entire villages massacred and destroyed.

Since its creation Israel has never stopped pursuing its colonial expansion. The Palestinians were forced to exile, fragmented and administered under different regimes. Some of them are Israeli citizens affected by structural discrimination and racism. Those living in the occupied West Bank are subjected to apartheid under decades of Israel's military control. The people of the Gaza Strip have suffered from the blockade imposed by Israel since 2006, which restricted movement of people and goods, resulting in growing poverty and deprivation.

Since the 7th of October and at the time of writing the death toll in the Gaza Strip is more than 8,500 people. Women and children have made up more than 62 percent of the fatalities, while more than 21,048 people have been injured. In recent days, Israel has bombed schools, residential areas, Greek Orthodox Church and several hospitals. Israel has also cut all water, electricity, and fuel

supply in the Gaza Strip. There is a severe shortage of food and medicine, causing a total collapse of a healthcare system.

Most of the Western and Israeli media justifies these deaths as mere collateral damage to fighting Hamas but is silent when it comes to Palestinian civilians targeted and killed in the Occupied West Bank. Since the beginning of 2023 alone, and before October 7, the death toll on the Palestinian side had already reached 227. Since the 7 of October, 121 Palestinian civilians have been killed in the occupied West Bank. More than 10,000 Palestinian political prisoners are currently detained in Israeli prisons.

Lasting peace and justice are only possible with the end of the ongoing occupation. Palestinians have the right to self-determination and resistance against Israeli's occupation, just like Ukrainians have the right to resist Russian invasion.

Our solidarity comes from a place of anger at the injustice, and a place of deep pain of knowing the devastating impacts of occupation, shelling of civil infrastructure, and humanitarian blockade from experiences in our homeland. Parts of Ukraine have been occupied since 2014, and the international community failed to stop Russian aggression then, ignoring the imperial and colonial nature of the armed violence, which consequently escalated on the 24th of February 2022.

Civilians in Ukraine are shelled daily, in

continued on page 31



## Multipolarity, Multilateralism and "Campism": On Imperialism Today

By Howie Hawkins

MUCH COMMENTARY ON the Left these days praises as "anti-imperialist" the transition from the unipolar hegemony of the U.S.-led West to a multipolar world with several centers of power. We hear the new multipolarity touted by leaders of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa).

Within the Left, partisans of states challenging Western dominance contend that multipolarity will open up space for socialist development led by China and other nominally socialist states.<sup>1</sup> Such currents tend to see U.S.-led Western imperialism as the only imperialism in the world today.

Thus any state in conflict with the United States is viewed as being in an "anti-imperialist camp," no matter how authoritarian, capitalist — or indeed imperialist — it may be.

For some, their stated support for multipolarity actually reduces to a bipolar concept of conflict between the reactionary camp of the imperialist West and the "progressive" Rest led by big powers China and Russia but also including authoritarian states like Syria, Iran, Eritrea, Nicaragua and North Korea.<sup>2</sup>

What's sometimes called the "campist" perspective falls apart when we realize how much the opposing sides, more like "frenemies," cooperate in the management of global capitalism and its imperialist exploitation of weaker countries. What seems underappreciated in discussions about the structure of world imperialism today is how much the imperialist and sub-imperialist countries cooperate as well as compete.

In particular, the big imperialist and sub-imperialist powers cooperatively share management of global capitalism through multilateral institutions like the International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, World Bank, and UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The internationalist Left focuses on supporting exploited classes and oppressed groups, rather than one constellation of states against another. It cautions that the multipolar development is leading to a renewed era of inter-imperialist rivalry, conflict, and authoritarianism among capitalist and bureaucratic states.

The emerging multipolarity is a change in the global structure of imperialist exploitation and domination, not an end to imperialism. Internationalist Left voices say that imperialism must be ended by democratic progressive movements against the capitalist and bureaucratic powers in all countries, not by the rise of new capitalist and bureaucratic states.<sup>3</sup>

### Antagonistic Cooperation

Ruy Mauro Marini, the Brazilian economist who pioneered Marxist dependency theory and the concepts of sub-imperial-

ism and super-exploitation, called the contradictory relationship among imperialist and sub-imperialist countries "antagonistic cooperation."<sup>4</sup>

Political economist Patrick Bond uses this framework to analyze both the competitive and cooperative actions among the imperialist and sub-imperialist powers, particularly how his home country of South Africa and the BRICS plug into the hierarchy of nations as sub-imperialist powers that have cooperated with Western imperialism more than they have contested it.

Bond provides the economic statistics and many examples of policy cooperation through multilateral institutions. In particular, China, the world's second largest economy and third largest contributor and holder of votes in the IMF, plays a large role in supporting the West's neoliberal agenda of austerity, deregulation and privatization as conditions for loans and in protecting fossil capital from decisive climate action in the annual UNFCCC-sponsored climate conferences.<sup>5</sup>

Alongside all their nationalist and militarist rhetoric toward each other, and sometimes armed conflict by proxy, the big imperialist and sub-imperialist powers also cooperate. Some examples:

- When Russian troops intervened in Kazakhstan in January 2022 to suppress the popular uprising instigated by oil workers against corruption and the maldistribution of oil wealth, they were protecting the property of major Western oil companies, including Chevron, Exxon, Shell, Total and Eni. The United States did not criticize Russia's intervention, even as it was warning Russia not to invade Ukraine with the troops it had amassed on Ukraine's border.<sup>6</sup>

- The Israeli Air Force has been bombing the military targets of Iranian militias and its proxy Hezbollah in Syria for years and with increasing frequency, at least weekly in the last year. Israel cannot do so without notifying and getting the acquiescence of both Russian and U.S. militaries, which respectively control the Western and Eastern sectors of Syrian air space.<sup>7</sup>

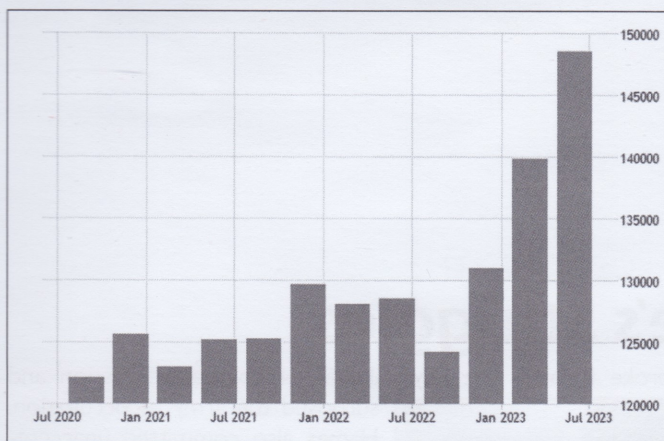
- A major reason for Israel's neutrality on the war in Ukraine is that it wants to maintain good relations with both Russia and the United States, in order to continue bombing Iranian military assets in Syria.<sup>8</sup>

- When U.S. helicopters fly special forces into Idlib province to take out jihadi leaders, like the Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019, they are flying through Russia-controlled air space with Russian assent.<sup>9</sup>

- "Socialist" China encourages U.S. capitalists to move production to China to take advantage of repressive labor conditions and lax environmental enforcement, but U.S. companies can only do so as joint ventures with Chinese companies from which both profit.<sup>10</sup>

*Howie Hawkins is a longtime Green Party activist and the party's 2020 presidential candidate. This article is based on his presentation to a Solidarity pre-convention meeting.*





Cancellation of Ukraine's foreign debt is as important to its survival as defeating the Russian invasion.

## Cooperative Climate Destruction

• Perhaps most ominously for our survival, the imperialist and sub-imperialist powers cooperate to undermine climate action through the UNFCCC, which sponsors the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) global climate summits. Patrick Bond has summed up this destructive imperialist multilateralism this way:

*"Future generations will look back to confirm that the UNFCCC was the most decisive multilateral site for China, Russia, other BRICS and similar fossil-dependent sub-imperial powers to agree to Western demands that there be no binding processes on greenhouse gas emissions reductions, no reparations for climate-related 'loss and damage', no counting of military-related (or shipping or air) emissions, no insistence on fossil fuel firms leaving 'unburnable carbon' resources as stranded assets, the confirmation of carbon markets and offsets so as to privatize the world's atmosphere, and full power to intellectual property rights for delimiting the spread of solar, wind and other vital technologies to those importers willing to pay the market price.*

*"In Glasgow [the Nov. 2021 COP climate summit], collaboration by India, the U.S. and China was essential in order to change language regarding coal extraction and combustion, from 'phase out' to 'phase down'."*

*This sub-imperial collaboration with imperial powers within the UNFCCC — which took such an explicit form in the imposition of the Copenhagen Accord of December 2009 — really is the story of our times, isn't it: the main reason capitalism will drive society and environment into what may truly be a terminal catastrophe."*<sup>11</sup>

In late July 2023 this imperial resistance to positive climate action continued amidst a deadly weeks-long record-shattering heat wave in the world's oceans and atmosphere, when a G20 meeting proposal to triple renewable energy development by 2030 was defeated by China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>12</sup>

## The Socialist Internationalist Alternative

The alliances of fossil capital with imperialist states has immediate relevance for the war in Ukraine, where currents on the Left are in sharp conflict. Responding to a statement by German campists, internationalist leftists from Ukraine, Russia, Poland and Germany issued an "anti-imperialist ecosocialist" statement called "Support Ukrainian Resistance and Disempower Fossil Capital."

Criticizing the claim that Russia's invasion was a defensive

response to NATO expansion and the demand that NATO countries stop arming Ukraine's resistance, the statement drew attention to the West's reluctant, late and limited support for Ukraine's military resistance.

It warned that the common interests of both Western and Russian capital, particularly fossil capital, are situated in restoring business as usual in the much larger Russian market, in exploiting the fossil resources of both Russia and Ukraine, and in exploiting labor under repressive and neoliberal economic regimes in both countries.

The internationalists warned that Western imperialist elites, from the oil and gas barons to Henry Kissinger and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, were saying that "peace" will require Ukraine to cede territory to Russia. The conflict might be resolved by an inter-imperialist deal to carve-up Ukraine between them and jointly enforce its subordinate position to the benefit of both Western and Russian capitalists.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to supporting one set of capitalist states against another, socialist internationalism looks to develop campaigns against all imperialisms in practical solidarity with democratic, progressive and socialist movements in all countries.

As the Ukrainian socialist Denys Pilash notes for Ukraine, they are struggling against both "Russian tanks and Western banks."<sup>14</sup>

In addition to appealing for weapons for the Ukrainian resistance, the Ukrainian Left is also calling on the Western Left to campaign for the *cancellation of Ukraine's massive foreign debts* owed to the IMF and Western banks, so that its resources can be devoted to defeating Russia's aggression, meeting Ukraine's social needs, and rebuilding the country after the war.<sup>15</sup>

If the campists were consistent in their opposition to Western imperialism, they would join the campaign to cancel Ukraine's foreign debt. ■

## Notes

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2. For example, the March 18, 2023 march and teach-in in Washington, D.C. initiated by the ANSWER Coalition, CodePink, and the People's Forum with the lead demand of "Peace in Ukraine – Negotiations not escalation!" had speakers supporting governments of Russia, China, Syria, Eritrea, and North Korea. Calls: [https://www.answercoalition.org/protest\\_march\\_18\\_19\\_peace\\_in\\_ukraine\\_say\\_no\\_to\\_endless\\_u\\_s\\_wars](https://www.answercoalition.org/protest_march_18_19_peace_in_ukraine_say_no_to_endless_u_s_wars), <https://www.codepink.org/march18>, <https://peoplesforum.org/events/peace-in-ukraine-say-no-to-endless-u-s-wars/>. Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcl8-5YrND8>.
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## In Solidarity with People's Struggles

STATEMENT BY the International Committee of the Fourth International, October 25, 2023

1. *The contradictions of the global capitalism continue to bring forth brutal wars and occupation.* Threatened by economic and political crisis, capitalist governments, bearers of racist, patriarchal and imperial ideologies, construct external and internal enemies, provoking wars and continuing oppression. Such conflicts are part of the global logic of neoliberal capitalism, the logic of intense economic and political competition, of widening inequalities and of the chaos it brings at every level. The wars we are facing are linked to the global crisis of capitalism and the resulting headlong rush into conflict between rival imperialist powers.

2. *Since 24 February 2022, with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, aiming at the total subjugation of Ukraine, Russian imperialism led by*

*Putin passed a qualitative milestone in its war against the peoples, against all those who oppose its authoritarian and "Great-Russian" colonial project.* Through their resistance, the Ukrainian people succeeded in containing the invasion, but Putin's war means a prolonged war, bringing death, the destruction of towns and infrastructures, the displacement of populations, ecocide and crimes of all kinds by the invading army.

3. *The Israeli state has transformed Gaza into a new and massive ghetto.* Since 8 October 2023, using the attacks by Hamas as a pretext, the Israeli state has been raining down fire on the Gaza Strip while totally cutting off the Palestinians living there from outside resources and increasing violence in the West Bank as well. Israeli colonialism, today led by Netanyahu and his extreme right-wing coalition, has reached a new qualitative stage in its project aimed at annihilating and expelling the Palestinian people from their territory. This project is at the heart of Israeli colonialism, it is a project of extreme violence that is actively supported by the governments of the United States and the European Union.

4. *The new assault by the Israeli state on the Palestinian people has called forth protest in large parts of the world.* Western powers and large parts of mainstream media call the new Israeli assault a "war against terrorism" and a response to the attack by Hamas and its allies on 7 October. During this attack, which

broke through the physical wall of colonial repression and

surprised the army of occupation, Hamas also committed unacceptable murders of civilians. We resolutely reject such crimes as acts that are contrary to our emancipatory project. But unlike those who use "double standards", we, like the Israeli left, can see how such violence comes from a context of extreme oppression.

5. *The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli occupation of Palestine are different in many respects, but in both cases the Fourth International is guided by the principle of support for the right to self-determination of peoples.* We reject any form of campism that favours one imperialist power over another or that would reduce revolutionary politics to geopolitical calculations. Instead, we base ourselves on solidarity with the peoples and their struggles, even even if today the people

are led by bourgeois and/or reactionary forces. The ruling classes refuse to recognize the right of peoples to self-determination and attempt to repress any resistance. But this repression is facing determined resistance. We support the struggle of the Ukrainian people and that of the Russian and Belarusian opposition to defeat Putin's criminal regime and obtain the withdrawal of Russian troops as the only way to achieve a just and lasting peace. Equally, we support the resistance of the Palestinian people and recognize that only the end of Israeli colonialism can bring an end to the violence.

6. *Situations of war are developing in different parts of the world where oppressive powers deny the rights of peoples and national minorities.* For example, the recent military offensive by the Azerbaijani regime resulted in the expulsion of more than 100,000 Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. This offensive was carried out in collaboration with Erdogan's Turkish regime, which continues to wage a war of its own against the Kurds in Turkey and Syria while constantly muzzling any progressive opposition in Turkey. Elsewhere, Kashmir continues to be the victim of colonial oppression by India and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia has waged an atrocious war in Yemen over the last few years, with the support of Western arms, French arms in particular.

7. *In cynical fashion, the regimes of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and others pretend to be friends of the Palestinian people.*



Calling for ceasefire and an end to occupation, the Palestinian diaspora are leading world wide actions.

<https://jimwestphoto.com>



They attempt to instrumentalize the global sympathy for the Palestinian cause to legitimize their own repressive regimes while refusing to give real meaningful support to the self-determination of the Palestinian people. Equally hypocritical are the Western governments that mouth noble rhetoric about democracy and self-determination in regard to Ukraine but simultaneously persist in their cooperation with and support for Israeli colonialism, ignoring all its violations of international law. Meanwhile, the Chinese government claims leadership over 'the global south' while supporting oppressive regimes such as the murderous dictatorship in Myanmar.

8. *U.S. imperialism, still the leading imperialism in the world, has seized on the Russian war against Ukraine as an opportunity to strengthen itself.* Part of this is its attempt instrumentalize Ukraine in its inter-imperialist rivalry with Russia. NATO has used the opportunity to enlarge itself and NATO member-states are using the Russian invasion as a pretext for massive increases of their military budgets. We demand the immediate dissolution of NATO and CSTO [the Russian-led military bloc —ed.]. Such military blocs of imperialist states are the enemies of social and national emancipation.

9. *The French state has waged its own so-called "war against terrorism" in the African Sahel, a war which has not solved any problems.* This French war has provoked an anti-imperialist response among the peoples of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, a response which has been used by military adventurers to seize power through *coups d'état* that offer no prospect of a progressive alternative. In Sudan, the military putschists are waging a war against their own peoples who are challenging their power.

10. *This world of militarism and wars, of the use of weapons banned by international conventions, of the denial of fundamental rights, particularly those of women, and massacres of civilians; this world of refugees pushed around the global and dominant classes refusing to tackle the climate crisis, this world seems to be losing all sense.* Sadly, this is not new: previous decades have seen wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Syria and elsewhere. But the situation seems even more difficult today: a catastrophic logic of a "clash of civilizations" is being implemented by both so-called "Western" governments as those of Putin and Xi Jinping. This logic provides a stepping stone for the racist and sexist far-right, which is on the rise everywhere. At a time when the climate emergency has us by the throat, precious resources are squandered in wars of aggression and occupation.

11. *And yet we are witnessing a massive worldwide aspiration for dignity and the defence of basic rights, for democratic, social and environmental justice, and for protecting the environment.* People's movements against imperialist and colonial domination, feminist movements, movements for LGBTIQ and minority rights, environmental movements, movements for social rights. In the face of current wars, we urgently need to take the offensive again through mass movements. Peace can only be just and lasting if it puts an end to oppression, occupation and militarism. This means rejecting any logic of sharing zones of influence between military blocs, neither NATO nor CSTO! Peace can only be just and lasting if it is anti-imperialist; if it is democratic, respects the rights of all and allocates the means necessary for ecological solutions. What is urgently needed is the mobilization of all energies, intelligence and means on a global scale. We need an ecosocialist transition to satisfy the fundamental needs of people everywhere!

12. *In the face of the barbarity of war, we need to mobilize in concrete solidarity from below, with peoples fighting for their rights, in complete independence from governments, global or regional powers and reactionary political forces.* We insist on the universality of principles such as the right of self-determination and the right to resist, whether in Ukraine, in Palestine or elsewhere. We support resistance against oligarchs and capitalists wherever they operate and have no illusions in reactionary and right-wing leaderships. We support the fight against the ultra-neoliberal agenda of the Zelensky government, and against its alignment with US imperialism. We condemn the reactionary world-view of Hamas and reject its criminal tactics. We do not forget how the repression of progressive forces favored religious fundamentalist forces such as Hamas.

13. *Today We must do everything to mobilize a massive worldwide movement in solidarity with the Palestinian people, together with their allies in Israel.* The Palestinian people are isolated and occupied. They stand alone, with almost no material support from outside. This makes our solidarity all the more necessary. We must prevent the expulsion of people, the "ethnic cleansing" of the Palestine people by the Israeli state and a second "Nakba," we demand an immediate end to the bombing and blockade in Gaza, a ceasefire, and humanitarian aid. We demand the release of prisoners on all sides. We stand in solidarity with Palestinian civil society and support its call to strengthen the Boycott Disinvestment Sanctions (BDS) movement.

14. *Our goal is a political solution that puts an end to colonization and guarantees the right of return of those expelled and equal rights of people of all origins on the land.* Mobilizations in solidarity with Palestine are facing major obstacles such as rhetoric aimed at isolating the mobilizations and the forces building them, and in other countries the physical repression of demonstrations and other expressions of solidarity. Despite such repression, the Palestine solidarity movement continues and by overcoming such obstacles, the movements also fights for democracy in its own countries.

15. We know that Hamas or other religious fundamentalist forces will not be allies in the search for a progressive Palestinian solution. The idea that the Palestinian people can achieve their national emancipation through a military defeat of the Israeli state, a state with overwhelming military superiority, is an illusion. In a Middle Eastern context of a mosaic of peoples and minorities, peace is possible only through the democratic emancipation of all.

The solution to the current worldwide crises can only come through mass international mobilization of the working people against imperialist occupation, for the right of peoples to self-determination, against the restriction of democratic freedoms, and for concrete solidarity, including humanitarian solidarity.

It is the role of the organizations of the workers' movement and popular movements to mobilize a broad section of the working class and the oppressed to contribute to these internationalist mobilizations, build concrete links with organisations of the oppressed and change the global balance of power.

***End the Israeli attacks against the Palestinian people, ceasefire now!***

***Russian troops out Ukraine!***

***Dissolve NATO and CSTO***

***Against all forms of imperialism, international solidarity!***



## The Antagonistic Cooperation of Global Imperialism: Paths for Socialist Internationalism

By Promise Li

THE BLOODY WAR in Ukraine and growing tensions around Taiwan show inter-imperial rivalries unevenly emerging amidst a general crisis of profitability among the ruling classes. While the age of unshakable U.S. imperial hegemony continues to slip away, no sides of these tensions promote better conditions for revolutionary change.

Quite the contrary, this inchoate state of multipolarity introduces varied permutations of state-capital collaboration, as well as conflict, that model new ways of containing working-class power. In fact, I will explore here the unprecedented level of economic interdependence we see today between the United States and its rivals — an effect of decades of neoliberal globalization.

The deafening silence from major powers on Azerbaijan's ethnic cleansing of Armenians, and the U.S. and China's invested interest in maintaining Israeli power, show that geopolitical antagonisms today express no straightforward rivalry.

Parts of the antiwar left, as represented for example by groups like CodePink, have no framework to account for these shifts. They see their sole responsibility as combating U.S. imperialism — which means that they have little to say when other imperialists and oppressing nations threaten the autonomy of small nations.

Worse, such groups' failure to understand the shifting contours of the imperialist world system today actually renders their well-meaning struggle against U.S. imperialism less effective, by failing to recognize U.S. imperialism's interdependence with other states — even those with which it is in tension.

### Entangled Imperialisms Today

The best framework to understand the rivalries amidst interdependence that shape global imperialism today is "antagonistic cooperation." First coined by German Marxist August Thalheimer and later elaborated by Brazilian Marxists from *Política Operária* (POLOP) in the 1960s, antagonistic cooperation, as POLOP's 1967 program illustrates, "a cooperation aimed at the conservation of the system and which has its basis in the very process of centralization of capital, and which does not eliminate the antagonisms inherent in the imperialist world."

In our present period, the concept can help explain how intense geopolitical rivalries between imperialist and sub-imperialist states — even those across rival geopolitical blocs

— can exist without interrupting capital accumulation on a global scale, albeit in uneven forms. This is not to downplay the existence and dangers of inter-imperialist rivalries, but to establish that such antagonisms emerge through the register of cooperation.

To be clear, this emphasis on inter-imperialist cooperation is not what Karl Kautsky envisioned as "ultra-imperialism," a fantasy that imperialists would peacefully lay down arms and co-exist to share profits. World War I dramatically disrupted this pipe dream, and still today, imperialists are clearly not peacefully co-existing. New sites of tension are turning into hot wars.

Nonetheless, despite these rivalries, globalization only seems to continue. All the talk of "de-risking" is one manifestation of globalization adapting to new conditions of geopolitical tension. What we see today is that full-scale decoupling between different imperialists is much less straightforward or inevitable than in World War I.

Economic interdependence between empires did not prevent full-scale war during the 1910s. But even the main scholars looking at economic interdependence during WWI, mainly study interdependence among the Allies and with overseas colonies, not across warring blocs. Jamie Martin, "Globalizing the History of the First World War: Economic Approaches," *The Historical Journal* vol. 65, no. 3 (June 2022): 838-55.

Today's U.S.-China tensions can emerge even as bilateral trade between the two countries hits an all-time high. Financialization has grown to monstrous heights unthinkable during the First World War. In other words, we need to consider how the persistence of these economic ties limits and shapes the terms of inter-imperialist antagonisms that inevitably emerge — in ways that Lenin, Hilferding, Bukharin, and other early theorists of imperialism did not fully predict.

The integration of the capitalist class through multilateral institutions, like the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization (WTO), comes into direct tension with the world system's current tendency toward renewed and rising economic and industrial nationalisms in the United States and China. The "decoupling" of certain industries, exemplified by the growing rivalries in tech industries, faces resistance from other dominant sectors of capital.

A few examples will illustrate my point. Despite reports that the growth of the Chinese plane manufacturer Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China (COMAC) is freezing out Western competitors in China, COMAC and Boeing just signed a new agreement to deepen collaboration at a joint research center in late 2022.

Even as Microsoft is relocating some staff away from its Chinese offices, the tech giant is still pursuing major joint

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ventures with Chinese firms, from Kubera to Avana. U.S. tariffs negatively impact Chinese imports, but Chinese exports continue to boom for items from electric vehicles to batteries.

Last year in a speech at Davos, Xi Jinping reaffirmed that “China will continue to let the market play a decisive role in resource allocation” while “uphold[ing] the multilateral trading system with the WTO at its center” — a sentiment recommitted by Vice-Premier Liu He in the same venue this past January.

Indeed, the supposed steep drop in Chinese imports to the United States in 2023 is more complicated than what it looks like at face value: most of these commodities are simply being rerouted through countries like Vietnam and Mexico. Even the CEO of Raytheon came out in the fall of 2023 to say that decoupling is simply not feasible, given the importance of rare minerals in China needed for production in the United States.

In a different but related vein, the tragic developments in Nagorno-Karabakh further testify to the reality that things aren’t as straightforward as traditional inter-imperialist rivalry. While the West has been looking to build links with Azerbaijan in an attempt to tap into its oil resources as an energy alternative to Russia since the war in Ukraine started, Azerbaijan has been deepening links with Russia to import its gas to keep up with this demand.

NATO member Turkey, which fueled the Azeri ethnic cleansing campaign, also hopes to become a new “gas hub” to launder Russian gas to the West as “Turkish gas.” Despite the Western sanctions on Russia, Chevron has not budged from its participation in the Russian-led Caspian Pipeline. We simply do not see these kinds of entanglements persisting through bloody war during World War I.

Growing industrial nationalism in different countries does not wholly impede their ruling classes’ commitment to neoliberal globalization. These suggest divisions within each national capitalist class — those for accelerating the “new Cold War” against those who oppose it.

Financial institutions dictate the terms of the imperialist world order more than ever before, notably in the form of asset managers like Blackrock and Vanguard, the latter now one of the largest shareholder blocs in both Exxon and the Chinese state-owned Sinopec.

Political economist Patrick Bond observes that different states, especially those touted by some as a multipolar alternative to Western capitalism, are helping to deepen and expand the accumulation of capital, as Rosa Luxemburg began to describe a century earlier. Bond writes:

*“First, amplified global capitalist crisis tendencies are emanating from centrifugal BRICS economies. Second, multipolarity is amplifying the neoliberal character of multilateral institutions, especially in the spheres of finance, trade and climate politics, as the BRICS gain a seat at the table. Third, in a subimperial manner, BRICS-based corporations are vital forces in super-exploitative accumulation within their respective regions and beyond.”<sup>1</sup>*

In other words, the major players in this “New Cold War” are not the only protagonists. Mid-sized and other regional states also find new forms of agency in this picture. They co-steer this continuation of capital accumulation structured by other hegemony, while finding room to boost their own political might, aided by the expansion of an important financial sector.

Champions of multipolarity from Lula to Xi, to quote Bond

again, talk left and walk right: they speak in anti-imperialist registers to distract from endogenous problems in their countries that cannot be fully reduced to U.S. sanctions, while continuing to defend globalization even more faithfully than the United States.

Old U.S. allies like the Saudis are “diversifying their portfolios,” so to speak, partly turning to China and various forms of neoliberal public-private partnerships for development. And same with Israel — whose trade with China skyrocketed in recent years just as the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign has taken off.

Even upon Israel’s genocidal leveling of Gaza in October, China criticizes Israel for going too far, but reaffirms the two-state solution. As Israel has looked to diversify its political and economic allies, China balances its deep commitments to both Israeli and various Arab bourgeoisies by endorsing a highly compromised vision of Palestinian sovereignty.

## Practical Demands

What should socialists take from this chaotic period of transformation in the imperialist world system? The key lesson today is that the central contradiction of inter-imperialist rivalry today — that is, the persistence of deep interdependence that structures the rivalry — distinguishes it from U.S. unipolarity, traditional inter-imperialist rivalry as in World War I, or what Karl Kautsky imagined as a peaceful “federation of the strongest, who renounce their arms race.”

We must not mistake the decoupling of certain industries as a straightforward undoing of the interdependence of the imperialist world system. This brings me to my key point: to do so would risk overlooking the many sites of inter-imperialist collaboration that can provide important targets for a socialist strategy on internationalist work.

How then to reframe our strategies for internationalism according to this analysis? First, we must recognize the persuasive appeal of a politics that insists that we can only focus on U.S. crimes to many new and young radicals today while remaining silent on the oppression of other states.

Some say that those in the imperial core have no right to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries, especially those under U.S. threat, and that our internationalist duty is limited to what U.S. imperialism does. This offers activists in the imperial core an illusory but compelling promise of practical action.

This promise is a powerful one: it allows socialists in the West to feel like they can adequately account for their privileges of being in the imperial core, and meaningfully support their counterparts abroad — without actually having to work through the immense challenges of supporting independent movements abroad amidst the pressures of global imperialism and their own national ruling class.

Bracketing away these struggles offers the easy path out, settling for solutions that limit the growth of revolutionary gains. As intellectual historian Barnaby Raine says, this type of politics is fundamentally pessimistic, “grounded in the reality that it’s difficult to conceive of bigger historical transformations.”<sup>2</sup>

The pervasiveness of this pessimism means that it would be challenging to persuade masses of socialists to concrete action for movements under attack by oppressors other than



the United States. We need to explain that these struggles are connected, and prioritize organizing solutions that can bridge these struggles, not isolate them from each other.

More precisely, we must be wary of solutions that blur socialists' political independence in relation to liberals in broad democratic struggles. As Lenin once said in *What Is To Be Done?*, socialists' conditional alliance with bourgeois democrats only makes sense "insofar as its democratic tasks ... are concerned," and we must beware of actions that threaten to reduce "the nascent working-class movement into an appendage of the liberals."

For one, it is ineffective and quite out-of-step with many socialists, anti-imperialists and other movement activists, for example, to call for them to actively lobby for more arms to Ukraine, as most are rightly horrified by what has now become the largest military budget in U.S. history.

Of course, socialists should defend the right of national liberation movements against foreign forces to demand arms from wherever they can, just as socialists did when Spanish republicans asked for arms from capitalist states against fascist rule during the Spanish Civil War.

At the same time, we must recognize that Western powers are weaponizing Ukraine and Taiwan, for example, to massively expand their own military budgets. Hawkish liberals are calling for increasing arms supply to Ukraine, and the left needs to think about how our organizing can distinguish ourselves from them, rather than tailing the liberals and uncritically lobbying for more.

We can support the right of Ukrainians to demand arms, while we oppose every effort by Western imperialists to use defensive and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine as an excuse to increase military budgets and infrastructure.

Beyond this issue, we need more than abstract, moralistic calls to "support workers' movements and self-determination everywhere" untethered to practical campaigns. We need to organize around positive solutions that distinguish us from the liberals, while drawing from the power of different local struggles to target sites of inter-imperial collaboration or interdependence.

This can take different forms. For example, the call demanding that multilateral financial institutions cancel Ukraine's debt concretely assists *both* Ukraine's self-determination struggle and reconstruction alternatives to the Zelensky government's neoliberal policies, while giving us practical targets (like the IMF) to organize against in the West.

Such concrete calls can be situated in transitional demands on a global scale, connecting to other ongoing grassroots campaigns against these institutions' expansive debt regimes and "structural adjustment" austerity schemes in parts of the global South, like Sri Lanka.

On the issue of China, we should be organizing socialists and workers in strategic industries of U.S.-Chinese collaboration (e.g. Apple and Tesla stores), merging "bread-and-butter" demands with internationalist ones. By identifying the interde-

pendence of U.S. corporations and Chinese capital as a concrete site of organizing, we can provide a practical alternative for many overseas dissidents who see the U.S. establishment's hawkish militarist solutions against China as a main avenue of internationalism.

We can build on past efforts, including but not limited to these examples:

- The UK-based Uyghur Solidarity Campaign protest of Zara's links to forced Uyghur labor.<sup>3</sup>

- DSA Muslim's 30 Day Pledge to #BoycottGenocide against Western companies complicit in forced Uyghur labor.<sup>4</sup>

- Overseas Chinese labor activists' protest of Apple stores calling out Apple and Foxconn's mistreatment of Chinese workers.<sup>5</sup>

- U.S. Apple Retail Union rank-and-file workers' 2012 "Day of Solidarity" with Chinese Foxconn workers.<sup>6</sup>

## Building An Internationalist Left

This framework also enables us to push diaspora communities leftward. For communities barred from expressing dissent in their home countries, movement spaces in liberal democracies in the imperial core often serve as the strategic site to raise demands as an independent opposition and to build mass organizations.

These groups are commonly pigeonholed as irredeemably right-wing and anti-communist, like the Cuban diaspora, but the reality is far more complex. Certainly, speaking from personal experience about Hong Kong diaspora circles, these spaces can be exceedingly pro-U.S., liberal and self-fashionably "non-ideological." But many are often readily responsive to any tactics as long as this helps combat their home regimes.

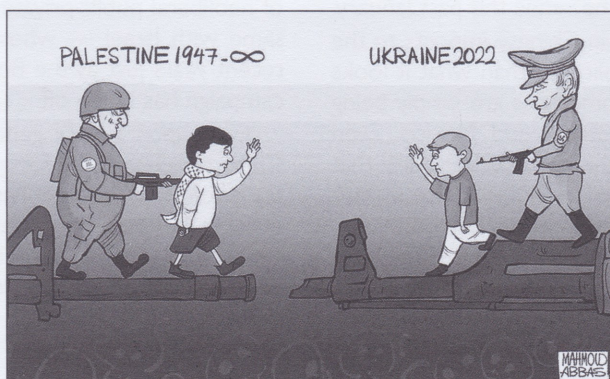
In this sense, for example, designing opportunities to organize different dissident diaspora communities resisting Chinese oppression into the broad pro-Palestinian BDS campaign can be salient. This idea can encourage these communities to recognize the intersections of U.S. and Chinese power in their mutual economic support of Israel's apartheid state, while bolstering the ranks of the pro-Palestinian solidarity struggle.

Thus the collective expertise of movements fighting against different imperialisms can effectively target sites of inter-imperial collaboration that persist despite geopolitical tensions, especially when one sovereign's economic and political power derives in part from another.

So-called anti-imperialist governments often appropriate and build on traditional colonial infrastructures of oppression. Tibetan writer Kalden Dhatsenpa observes that Canadian mining companies' "technical knowledge and capital has helped hasten [the] pace and scale [of] the Chinese dispossession of Tibet."<sup>7</sup>

Pan Yue, the current head of China's Ethnic Affairs Commission, openly proclaims that China should learn from the U.S., Russia, and Israel's colonial methods to introduce Han settlers to its Western frontier.

The same goes for the imperialist resources that the Chinese





state has long recruited to build the Chinese surveillance state in Xinjiang, like the Chinese state-run police academies' adoption of Israeli counterinsurgency tactics.<sup>8</sup> Opposing U.S. imperialism should go beyond selectively critiquing its vehicles, instead addressing its entanglements with other "rival" states.

We must support all movements for self-determination against oppressors, but the precise form in which this solidarity takes can be different depending on larger geopolitical dynamics and other specific conditions.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Ukraine, which has the backing of Western imperialists, we must stake our ground more persuasively on organizing people into coalitional efforts toward a positive set of campaign work: abolish Ukraine's debt alongside other debts of the global South, build solidarity with Ukrainian trade unions and uplift their demands.

This approach does not abandon support of Ukrainian self-defense, but centers a practical platform of international solidarity as a mirror image of those focused on opposing Ukrainians demanding aid. The best tactic against the attacks on our stance on Ukraine's self-determination is not to fight these critics simply on their own terms, but to reframe the terms of the debate.

Our core argument should be: if socialists really want the best for Ukrainians, they would be actively fighting with us on the practical demands we suggest, not a merely negative and oppositional platform (e.g. opposing arms to Ukraine without doing anything else) that promotes no concrete avenues for solidarity to a movement for self-determination.

On the other hand, such kinds of intransigent oppositional campaigns are essential in instances when "our own" war machine is pitched against these movements for self-determination. Building a broad front to oppose U.S. arms to Israel with a diversity of tactics is immediately effective. The antagonistic cooperation of imperialists from the United States to China to maintain Israel's settler-colonial state means that we can bring in other movements to oppose all kinds of investments in Israel, from American to Chinese firms.

Such a framework at least gives us a starting point to encourage socialists to think about the violence of other capitalist states and imperialisms. Our response to those who fault us for not being committed against U.S. imperialism should be that they, in fact, stop short of thoroughly combating U.S. imperialism — by withholding action against the other imperialisms with which it is entangled. ■

## Notes

1. Patrick Bond, "The BRICS' Centrifugal Geopolitical Economy," *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 18, no. 3 (2018): 536.
2. Barnaby Raine, "Is The Enemy of My Enemy My Friend?" *The Breach*, October 22, 2021, <https://breachmedia.ca/is-the-enemy-of-my-enemy-my-friend/>.
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## Ukrainian Letter of Solidarity with Palestinian People — continued from page 23

their homes, in hospitals, on bus stops, in queues for bread. As a result of the Russian occupation, thousands of people in Ukraine live without access to water, electricity or heating, and it is the most vulnerable groups that are mostly affected by the destruction of critical infrastructure. In the months of the siege and heavy bombardment of Mariupol there was no humanitarian corridor.

Watching the Israeli targeting the civilian infrastructure in Gaza, the Israeli humanitarian blockade and occupation of land resonates especially painfully with us. From this place of pain of experience and solidarity, we call on our fellow Ukrainians globally and all the people to raise their voices in support of the Palestinian people and condemn the ongoing Israeli mass ethnic cleansing.

We reject the Ukrainian government statements that express unconditional support for Israel's military actions, and we consider the calls to avoid civilian casualties by Ukraine's MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] belated and insufficient. This position is a retreat from the support of Palestinian rights and condemnation of the Israeli occupation, which Ukraine has followed for decades, including voting in the UN.

Aware of the pragmatic geopolitical reasoning behind Ukraine's decision to echo Western allies, on whom we are dependent for our survival, we see the current support of Israel and dismissing Palestinian right to self-determination as contradictory to

Ukraine's own commitment to human rights and fight for our land and freedom. We as Ukrainians should stand in solidarity not with the oppressors, but with those who experience and resist the oppression.

We strongly object to equating of Western military aid to Ukraine and Israel by some politicians. Ukraine doesn't occupy the territories of other people, instead, it fights against the Russian occupation, and therefore international assistance serves a just cause and the protection of international law. Israel has occupied and annexed Palestinian and Syrian territories, and Western aid to it confirms an unjust order and demonstrates double standards in relation to international law.

We oppose the new wave of Islamophobia, such as the brutal murder of a Palestinian American 6-year old and assault on his family in Illinois, USA, and the equating of any criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. At the same time, we also oppose holding all Jewish people all over the world accountable for the politics of the state of Israel and we condemn anti-Semitic violence, such as the mob attack on the airplane in Daghestan, Russia.

We also reject the revival of the "war on terror" rhetoric used by the US and EU to justify war crimes and violations of international law that have undermined the international security system, caused countless deaths, and has been borrowed by other states, including Russia for the war in

Chechnya and China for the Uyghur genocide. Now Israel is using it to carry out ethnic cleansing.

## Call to Action

We urge the implementation of the call to ceasefire, put forward by the UN General Assembly resolution.

We call on the Israeli government to immediately stop attacks on civilians, and provide humanitarian aid; we insist on an immediate and indefinite lifting of siege on Gaza and an urgent relief operation to restore civilian infrastructure. We also call on the Israeli government to put an end to the occupation and recognise the right of Palestinian displaced people to return to their lands.

We call on the Ukrainian government to condemn the use of state sanctioned terror and humanitarian blockade against the Gazan civilian population and reaffirm the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. We also call on the Ukrainian government to condemn deliberate assaults on Palestinians in the occupied West Bank.

We call on the international media to stop pitting Palestinians and Ukrainians against each other, where hierarchies of suffering perpetuate racist rhetoric and dehumanize those under attack. We have witnessed the world uniting in solidarity for the people of Ukraine and we call on everyone to do the same for the people of Palestine. (Visit Commons website at <https://commons.com.ua>.)



# REVIEW

## The Testing of America: Birmingham 1963

By Malik Miah

### You Have to Be Prepared to Die Before You Can Begin to Live:

Ten Weeks in Birmingham That Changed America

By Paul Kix

McMillan Publishers: Celadon Books, May 2023. 400 pages. \$30 hardcover.

THE TITLE OF this important book reflects a turning point in the civil rights revolution of the 20th Century. It is based on a comment by Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, the most dynamic and committed of Birmingham's civil rights leaders.

Little had changed for Black people in the nearly 10 years since *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned the "separate but equal" racist doctrine as applied in public education for nearly a century.

The successful 1955-56 Montgomery, Alabama 13-month bus boycott put the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership on the map. Rosa Parks, who refused to move to the back of a bus, also became a leading voice for change. The Freedom Rides had desegregated interstate busing.

Yet these victories were limited. Congress failed to adopt national civil rights laws with teeth. Legal segregation with all its indignities and brutalities continued to be enforced across the South.

The slow progress to end Jim Crow divided the movement. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) had failed in its 1962 attempt to desegregate Albany, Georgia. Some younger activists thought King's strategy was ineffective. They argued for more radical strategies.

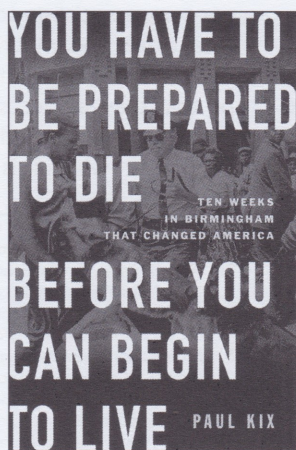
The Supreme Court's recent rulings opened some doors, but the white power structures in the South refused to back down. The Federal government bowed before "states' rights," and with rare exceptions refused to use its power to break segregation.

### Birmingham Takes Center Stage

King and his leadership team needed to change that failure to permanently end segregation. He turned to Birmingham, the most segregated city in the South, understanding what awaited there.

Journalist and author Paul Kix vividly describes Birmingham's brutal treatment of

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been bombed since the end of World War II. Bombings were so frequent in one Black neighborhood that it was now called Dynamite Hill. These bombings went unsolved for the same reason cops routinely exercise their 'rights' to shoot any Black 'suspects' who turned their backs and fled.

"The force was overseen by Eugene 'Bull' Connor, a virulent racist and public safety commissioner with barely cloaked ties to the Ku Klux Klan. The point of Bull's Birmingham — and make no mistake, Bull ran Birmingham — was fear.

"The police raped Black women. The Klan castrated Black men. The cops and Klavern tapped the phones and, no doubt, bombed the houses of anyone who tried to improve the lives of the oppressed. . . .

"In order for its nonviolence to work, the SCLC needed to subject itself to the full wrath of Birmingham, in the hope that white people outside the city might at last see, through the SCLC's suffering, the plight of all Black people in America." (7)

Kix, who is white, authored his book partly to tell the dramatic events of 1963, but also under the impact of the murder of George Floyd in 2020, and to teach the lessons to his own biracial children and today's activists fighting systemic racial injustice.

### From Plan to Implementation

The 1963 Birmingham 10-week campaign would shape the course of the Civil Rights Movement and the future of the country.

The white business owners of the city would eventually break ranks. The mass actions filled the jails and hurt the economy, leading to a compromise agreement at the

African Americans:

"Birmingham, Alabama, was not so much a city in 1963 as a site of domestic terror. It was known, sometimes gleefully, and by public officials, as 'Bombingham.'"

"More than fifty residences and Black-owned businesses had

end of May. The deal had the quiet backing of the Kennedy administration.

Even though the city bosses including the mayor and Bull Connor did not sign off on it, that "truce" cracked open segregation, including plans to remove "Whites Only" signs and to hire a few Black people to the downtown businesses for the first time. It was the victory King hoped to win.

Kix notes, "By breaking segregation in Birmingham, the project began to move beyond the city's borders. Marches and protests spread though the segregated South." (284)

### Narrative Reads Like a Novel

The book includes on its first page the infamous photograph of a Black teenager standing up to a police officer and his lunging German Shepherd. (The teenager was not part of the protest.)

What Kix describes is the full legacy of the 1963 Birmingham photo. It represented not just the past but the present reality. Kix wrote the Birmingham story as he stared at a May, 2020 photo of the Minneapolis police officer suffocating George Floyd.

Kix takes the reader behind the scenes telling the story of the SCLC's pivotal campaign. Few white people in Alabama believed that Blacks were equal to them, and definitely did not support a "colorblind" society.

"White is right" was their firm belief.

Governor George Wallace, like Bull Connor, was openly racist (at his inauguration he proclaimed "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever") and pledged to defend Jim Crow.

Kix provides a window into the minds of the four extraordinary SCLC men who met at Dorchester Academy in Georgia, along with others, to discuss and plan what was initially called Project X — Martin Luther King, Jr. (president), Wyatt Walker (executive director), Fred Shuttlesworth (Birmingham leader) and James Bevel (national director of direct action).

The campaign that was initially labeled "Project X" became known as "Project C" (for confrontation). Kix zeros in on why Project C is crucial to our understanding of our own time and the impact that strategic activism can have.

King closed the planning meeting saying, "I want to make a point that I think everyone here should consider very carefully. I have



to tell you that in my judgment some of the people sitting here today will not come back alive from the campaign." (16)

King was not naïve. He knew that J. Edgar Hoover's FBI was following him and his associates. He was careful where he held meetings like the two-day conference in Georgia and used codes in his calls.

### Nonviolent Confrontation Strategy

The SCLC leadership saw a major confrontation as essential to force the city's white government as to move the ruling class to end segregation. Kix writes that the leadership knew the confrontation would be bloody for the community, but thought it was the only tactic that could push the Federal government to act.

The aim was to fill the jails with non-violent demonstrators in sit-ins at lunch counters and segregated businesses. When that failed to get a mass response, the SCLC and local leaders faced a choice: retreat or find a new strategy.

The leaders knew that success was a long shot, especially after the first week when there were arrests but the Black community activism was not what they hoped for. There were not the beatings and lockups by the police that they believed could change the state's or country's views of segregation.

James Bevel had left the city in that first week in frustration. Wyatt Walker and King were worried about defeat.

King called the SCLC brain trust to Birmingham to discuss what to do next. All of them, including his father, urged him to pause or delay more demonstrations. King instead decided to announce he would march and lead a small peaceful delegation to be arrested on "Good Friday." Ralph Abernathy, his close associate and friend, joined him.

In response to King's announcement, the city filed a legal injunction to stop protests without permits. The state court ruled that those arrested could be jailed for up to six months, and the only bail bondsman was told by the city it would no longer accept its bonds. This meant the SCLC would have to pay the entire bond. No permits were ever granted.

King, Abernathy and Shuttlesworth were arrested by Bull Connor's cops. King was placed in the notorious Birmingham jail and put in solitary confinement and not allowed to see his lawyers.

Walker contacted singer and activist Harry Belafonte in New York to see if he could talk to Attorney General Robert Kennedy about doing something to help. The AG wouldn't.

Belafonte drafted a letter signed by prominent King allies and sent it to President Kennedy and the AG. Walker also had the letter go to the *New York Times* reporter in Birmingham. Belafonte also pledged to raise

funds for bail.

The NYT reported the next day that President Kennedy was not happy about King's confinement. The jail warden then allowed King's lawyer access.

The Democratic president was sympathetic, but he led a party that was run by southern Dixiecrats who wholeheartedly supported white supremacy.

In a coordinated campaign that would last for weeks, King and his team used economic boycotts, marches and rallies.

King's Good Friday incarceration (it took eight days until bail was raised with help from labor unions), Kix explains, was the spark needed to force change in the radically racist town of Birmingham.

### The Letter from Birmingham's Jail

While incarcerated King wrote his famous manifesto "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." He used a stub pencil, whatever paper his lawyer, Clarence Jones, could get to him, and after a week completed it. Wyatt Walker later had it published as the campaign unfolded.

The letter is a powerful statement of the SCLC's strategy and views on how to defeat segregation. King wrote the letter in response to eight clergymen's "open letter" published in the Birmingham newspapers. King replied:

*"I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the argument of 'outsiders coming in.' I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every Southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia.*

*"We have some eighty-five affiliate organizations all across the South, one being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Whenever necessary and possible, we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates.*

*"Several months ago, our local affiliate here in Birmingham invited us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came, we lived up to our promises...*

*"Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider. ...*

*"In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community.*

*"Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality.*

*"There have been more unsolved bombings*

*of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal, and unbelievable facts."*

King also took up the views of white "moderates" that demonstrators must be "patient" as these liberals claim sympathy for the fight to end segregation:

*"I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate.*

*"I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Council or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a 'more convenient season.'*

*"Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection..."*

### Youth Take Lead

The strategy of nonviolent direct action and communication through codes was crucial in organizing including with youth in middle and high schools. The leaders, including King, were initially opposed to mobilizing children in school walk outs and protests. They had never done this in other cities.

But James Bevel and his wife Diane Nash thought otherwise. Bevel had returned from Mississippi to Birmingham after King's arrest. He and Nash began with training children in King's nonviolent civil disobedience tactics.

The young made the Campaign C dynamic and powerful. The planned action was called D-Day, May 2, which began at 11:00 am with school walk outs. Some 973 Black children were arrested that day. They packed paddy wagons and buses, and the jails. The "Children's Crusade" was a success. Bevel had outwitted Bull Connor.

The next day, "Double D-Day," some two thousand kids came to the organizing church ready to march and be jailed. Walker sent them out in waves of fifty marching to the public park.

Bull Connor, his police and now the fire department with powerful fire hoses were ready to prevent the students from going anywhere. They sprayed the first protesters with moderate level of water spray. Ten boys and girls stood firm, shouting, FREEDOM.

The firefighters then shot the water at full blast, yelling "knock the niggers down."



The spectators, mainly adults, watching the students walk into the fire hoses, reacted by throwing stuff at the police and fire crew. Then the cops brought out the K-9 German Sheppard dogs. One dog was called "Nigger." (218)

"The whole world is watching Birmingham!" Shuttleworth said as the jails were filled — precisely the aim of Project Confrontation. National and international media highlighted the actions of the white supremacist police and ruling class.

White terror united Blacks and liberal whites around the country. It pushed the Kennedy brothers to consider action.

As one teenage girl later said, "The reality of it was that we were born Black in Alabama. And we were going to get hurt if we didn't do something." (190)

While Project C was a turning point in the civil rights movement to end legal segregation, it was not the only major political event that changed history that year.

On August 28, 1963 King and other leaders led the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. They understood that the time was now, through legal and extra-legal action, to push the federal government to enact laws to make "separate but equal" dead forever.

### Meaning of March on Washington

Today conservatives and rightwing commentators try to claim the mantle of King's famous "I have A Dream" speech at the 1963 March. The only meaning for them was King's hope someday to see Blacks and whites as equal and considered by "the content of their character, not by the color of their skin."

This leaves out King's call to end racial injustice, create affirmative action, equal job opportunities and education programs. Full freedom was not possible unless all these actions were taken.

At the same time, the movement was led by the civil rights establishment but also challenged by a more militant youth left wing. A young John Lewis, then 23, arrived at the March for Jobs and Freedom prepared to excoriate the Kennedy administration, which many racial justice activists viewed as lacking moral resolve in its approach to civil rights.

The key point that Lewis, who later served in Congress for years and died in July 2020, made was that patience was running out — Black people in the South were living in a police state and the inaction of the government to end segregation was no longer acceptable.

The toned-down speech by Lewis, after the rally organizers' editing, was still quite militant. (His speech, available on the SNCC digital archives, deserves to be read today.)

### Meeting President Kennedy

Prior to the August march, President Kennedy and AG Robert Kennedy met with King and the civil rights leaders.

As Kix observes in the concluding chapter, "But for Birmingham," this meeting was held in June. Kennedy said he wasn't against a march, but not now.

Kix writes, "President Kennedy said he wasn't against a march per se, but 'now we are in a new phase, the legislative phase, and results are essential....To get the votes, we need ... first, to oppose demonstrations which will lead to violence, and second give Congress a fair chance to work its will.'"

King responded, "Some people thought Birmingham ill-timed." That had included Robert Kennedy.

"But for Birmingham," President Kennedy conceded, "we wouldn't be here today." (308-9)

The success of the Birmingham mass actions led to more protests across the South and changed Kennedy's mind. What became the 1964 Civil Rights Act was in fact the second Emancipation Proclamation. It would be the death blow to legal segregation.

Nevertheless, the white supremacists continued their violence after the Birmingham deal. They never accepted a challenge to white power.

Three months after the Birmingham "C" campaign success, the 16th Street Baptist Church where many of the nightly mass meetings occurred, the Ku Klux Klan set a dynamite bomb that exploded killing four Black girls on Sunday morning.

That terrorist act did not slow the march

toward the end of legal segregation. King of course did not back down from using direct action marches and protests. The lesson for today is the same: *never back down in the face of racism, police violence and capitalist injustice.*

After President Kennedy's assassination in November, President Lyndon Johnson pushed through Congress the 1964 Civil Rights Act (after Birmingham, Kennedy referred to the draft as the "Bull Connor" act), the 1965 Voting Rights Act and other historic decisions including executive orders supporting affirmative action programs.

King would become a martyr with his assassination in 1968. Many civil rights leaders rushed through the legislative doors and other portals to take advantage of these legal changes. In response the Dixiecrats quit the Democratic Party and became Republicans. They pushed back at the end of legal segregation and fought to roll back the gains.

In 2023 the Supreme Court has declared the society "colorblind," to outlaw affirmative action in higher education and thereby roll back educational opportunity for Black people. Around the country, books that tell the story of racism and freedom struggles are banned from school classrooms and libraries.

That's another reason why *You Have to Be Prepared to Die Before You Can Begin to Live* is a must-read for every student of history and fighter for social justice and equality. It is an important record of 1963, but just as significantly a call to action today. ■



Some of the March on Washington planners: Mathew Ahmann, Cleveland Robinson, Rabbi Joachim Prinz, A. Philip Randolph, Joseph Rauh, John Lewis and Floyd McKissick.

Rowland Scherman



# REVIEW

## First Latin American Communist Conference: Echoes of Revolution

By Marc Becker

WHY DOES A Communist Party conference held nearly a century ago in South America still hold significance for us today?

Surprisingly, the discussions and debates that took place during the First Latin American Communist Conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, from June 1-12, 1929, continue to resonate with our present issues related to organizational strategies, class struggles, and identity politics.

During this historic gathering, 38 delegates from across the Americas and as far away as Moscow convened to deliberate on a wide array of topics. Foremost on their minds was the global landscape, marked by the looming threat of a new world war.

Delegates grappled with the strategies and tactics needed to organize an effective anti-imperialist movement. They distinguished between revolutionary warfare against imperialism, exemplified by Augusto César Sandino's battle against U.S. Marines in Nicaragua, and reactionary conflicts among imperialist powers and their satellite states.

The assembled comrades foresaw that Latin America, rich in natural resources, could not remain immune to global conflicts and would be directly involved. Beyond these external concerns, the conference delved deeply into Latin American political struggles.

### Revolutionary Strategic Options

One of the most poignant moments of the conference involved a report on the banana plantation strikes the previous year against the United Fruit Company in Colombia. This event, famously fictionalized by Gabriel García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, was recounted in even more compelling eyewitness detail during the conference.

The workers' response to the army's demand to disperse, with a defiant cry of "long live the strike," was met with a brutal massacre, leaving hundreds dead and wounded. As organizer Raúl Eduardo Mahecha Caicedo, who had rallied 32,000 workers for higher wages and better working conditions, described the events:

*Marc Becker is the translator and editor of The Latin American Revolutionary Movement: Proceedings of the first Latin American communist conference, June 1929 (Brill, 2023), as well as other works on the history of the Latin American left.*

*"One last bugle call and a new shout from the striking workers in support of the strike was silenced by 300 soldiers firing their machine guns point-blank at the strikers. More than 600 of our compañeros were left lying on the ground, of which more than 200 died."*

In the end, Mahecha counted "1,004 dead, including men, women, and children; 3,068 wounded; more than 500 imprisoned compañeros and hundreds of comrades sentenced to many years in prison."

Reading Mahecha's account of the banana strike in Colombia alongside classic accounts of the Bolshevik revolution, such as John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World* or more recent treatments such as China Miéville's *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution*, gives a sense of how unpredictable the outcomes of popular uprisings can be.

Rather than mourning the dead — as Joe Hill famously mandated "don't mourn, organize!" — the gathered delegates analyzed what they might have done differently.

More broadly, arguments for at least five perspectives on revolutionary strategies were under discussion: revolution from below, longterm political organization, welcoming repression with the hope that it would cause people to rebel spontaneously, resorting to what some criticized as terrorist activities, and electoral paths to power.

In 1928, Colombia was on the verge of a Bolshevik-style revolution that would have set not only that country but the entire continent on an entirely different trajectory. Instead, the conservative Colombian oligarchy gained the upper hand and for another century ruled the country as the region's most faithful ally of U.S. imperial interests.

Mahecha was a dedicated organizer who was committed to mass action as a strategy that would lead to a socialist revolution. But he was also a fighter, and Comintern officials criticized him for being too quick to action. His "anarchist-putschist temperament" meant that he wanted to act rather than talk. Even so, he acted as a good comrade and vowed to comply with whatever the party ordered.

While Mahecha was quick to action, others argued for the importance of the preparation of a vanguard party that was better prepared to lead a large-scale movement. With better groundwork, the workers could not only have won the strike but also ushered in the first socialist revolutionary government

in the Americas.

Mahecha and those on the frontlines of the strike lamented that political leaders, who remained removed in the distant capital city of Bogotá, failed to grasp the urgency and intensity of the situation on the ground, and hence refused to dedicate the resources necessary to assure immediate victory.

Even more so than Mahecha, the famed Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros was quick to resort to violence rather than engaging in the long and painfully drawn-out process of political organization.

Siqueiros had fought with Venustiano Carranza's constitutional army during the Mexican Revolution a decade earlier, and later attempted to murder the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky. He was less interested in organization or ideological preparation than moving quickly to armed actions.



Jules Humbert-Droz

### Mass Movement

Jules Humbert-Droz, the head of the Latin Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) in Moscow who participated actively

in the conference, pushed back against these so-called accelerationist approaches of "the worse things get, the better for us." Rather, he urged agitating for, and accepting, gradual reforms with the attitude that if we want to move left, we need to move left.

As Che Guevara would also later state in his classic text on guerrilla warfare, Humbert-Droz rejected "individual terrorist acts that are detached from mass action as a replacement for the mass movement."

The removal or execution of a repressive leader would only lead to that person's replacement with another similar (or worse) tyrant, not the much larger and urgently needed structural changes. A military *coup d'état* that rearranges the chairs on the deck of a sinking ship should not be mistaken for the thoroughgoing societal transformations that a socialist revolution would introduce.

Delegates also cautioned against relying on what they called "caudillos" or autocratic leaders to lead the masses. Leaders, they be-



lieved, would not save them. More important was to engage in a longer and more difficult process of building a movement from the base up. The importance of formulating a strong grassroots organization as the foundation for a revolutionary movement was continually reinforced.

### Problems of Electoral Politics

As with today, dedicating limited resources to the electoral process was a controversial and contentious topic. At one point, the Colombian labor organizer Mahecha blurted out that he thought "participation in elections is stupid, because even if we have a million votes we will not be able to seize power."

Zacharij Mijailovich Rabinovich, a Young Communist International representative to the South American Secretariat, and Victorio Codovilla, the secretary general of the South American Secretariat, responded in unison, "You can never seize power through elections, *compañero!*"

They recognized that it is one thing to win an elected office, and something else entirely to make a social revolution that transforms the government and introduces new institutions. Miguel Contreras from Argentina complained about parties that had been reduced to a meaningless nucleus "whose only concerns are limited to the most comfortable and harmless electoral and parliamentary actions."

Humbert-Droz similarly cautioned that a party "will suffer parliamentary degeneration if it limits its role just to electoral activity" rather than "mobilizing the broad masses of workers." The left today continues to recognize the limitations of attempting to implement progressive policies through the electoral process.

Comintern representative Humbert-Droz advocated fighting for incremental political gains wherever and however necessary. This included a strategy that assumed a strategic approach to running candidates in elections, even while maintaining an organized presence on the streets to force changes through to fruition.

A continual theme was the importance of grassroots organizing, particularly among workers, to lay a solid foundation for a revolutionary movement.

"Union work is hard," a representative from the Profintern (the Red International of Labor Unions) commented. "It does not have its bright spots like other tasks. It is an invisible and dark job that demands much personal sacrifice and a lot of perseverance. Even so, it has the value of being a very important political factor for the victory of the proletariat."

### Discussing Race, Class & Gender

Delegates at the conference discussed racial problems head-on. While many Brazilians had internalized the idea of their country as a

democracy where race did not matter, Black delegates spoke of the persistence of racism.

Brazilian delegate Leoncio Basbaum acknowledged that "racial problems in Latin America are a matter of fundamental importance." He recognized that color prejudice existed in Brazil and that the party needed to fight against it, but claimed that "true racial hatred" as existed in the United States was not present in the country. Rather he



*Sandalio Junco, Afro-Cuban labor organizer.*

encouraged a class, not race, struggle.

The Afro-Cuban delegate Sandalio Junco in contrast emphasized the importance of confronting racism, though the methods for doing so remained a contentious issue. He pointed out that no party had

properly studied the issue, and that many members denied the problem existed.

Junco proceeded to detail the miserable conditions that Blacks faced throughout the hemisphere. "The problem exists," he insisted, "and impels us more and more imperiously to deal with it and to determine the line that we communists must follow regarding it."

Nevertheless, how to solve these problems was and remains a contentious issue because, as Humbert-Droz commented, "not only do racial problems exist in Latin America, but they are also extremely complex."

Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui connected racism to underlying structural issues of economic exploitation and argued that it needed to be addressed on that level. "The problem is not racial but rather social and economic," he contended — in a fashion that Adolph Reed and others would subsequently proclaim. "But race has a role in it [social and economic exploitation and oppression] and the methods of confronting it."

For Mariátegui, eliminating racism without addressing class would leave intact "all the internal and external contradictions of the bourgeois state." A more wealthy and privileged strata of Indigenous and Black peoples would not solve anything, even while he fully recognized the persistent and pernicious nature of racial discrimination.

It became readily apparent to the assembled delegates that various forms of



*José Carlos Mariátegui*

oppression needed to be fought on all levels simultaneously. Reading through their debates one hundred years later presents a foreshadowing of what later came into vogue as intersectionality — but this less in the sense of how Kimberlé Crenshaw subsequently constructed it but more along the lines of how Marxists such as Barbara Foley have theorized an understanding that race, class, and gender cannot be reduced to similar modes of oppression.

Foley has written that "although intersectionality can usefully describe the effects of multiple oppressions ... it does not offer an adequate explanatory framework for addressing the root causes of social inequality in the capitalist socioeconomic system." To do that, we need to "move past the discourse of 'rights'" and instead examine the ownership of the means of production. In truth, race, class, and gender operate so differently and address such fundamentally distinct issues that in truth they cannot "intersect."

### Working through Problems

The communist parties desired to be grounded in the working class, which raised issues of what to do with intellectuals who inevitably were attracted to their revolutionary movements. Some of the peasant delegates at the meeting wanted to evict all intellectuals, whereas others urged the valuable contributions of "honest intellectuals."

Likewise, a significant rural-urban divide emerged. Most of the leaders lived in cities, even as the majority of people who formed the base of their revolutionary movement lived in the countryside. How should they "go to the masses," as Lenin urged?

The organizers also struggled with how to get members to commit to paying dues and how to organize immigrant populations.

From the very beginning of organizing for the conference, one agenda topic was to be women's issues, but all the delegates were men. Although the Comintern's South American Secretariat circulated resolutions on women's issues, presenting a clarion call for gender equality and women's rights, the lack of women's attendance highlights the gap between ideals and lived realities.

Oddly enough, a transcription of the discussion was not included in the published proceedings — unlike for the other themes.

Urged to "study fighting; fight studying," conference organizers sought to merge theory and practice. By studying their experiences, drawing lessons from past mistakes and successes, they could raise the ideological level of their parties.

It is inspiring and instructive to see how the delegates assembled in Buenos Aires in June of 1929 came together to grapple with these important and persistent issues. In large part that remains the value of reviewing the

*continued on page 44*



# REVIEW

## Dispossession and Resistance: The Making of Capitalism

By Mike McCallister

### The War Against the Commons: Dispossession and Resistance in the Making of Capitalism

by Ian Angus

Monthly Review, 2023, 246 pages, \$26 paper.

IN *THE WAR Against the Commons*, Ian Angus reviews 400 years of English history to uncover the origin story of English capitalism. He suggests that if more working people learn about how capitalism was born, perhaps there are lessons to learn about taking its power away.

Angus is the editor of the online ecosocialist journal *Climate and Capitalism* (where much of the research for this book was originally presented) and author of *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System* (2016).

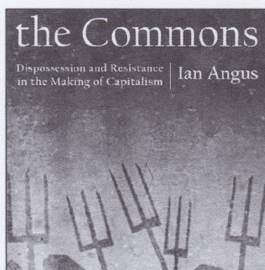
In this new book, Angus describes in vivid and readable terms how the countryside and peasants' lives were changed. More importantly, he describes how they resisted these changes. Landlords and capitalists used the state to take away the commoners' rights and turn them into urban wage workers by 1860.

We can see an analogous process today. More family farmers in the United States and elsewhere get pushed out of farming by industrial agriculture. They wind up forced to take jobs in the cities to keep paying off their growing debts.

In early human civilization, people were "self-provisioning," Angus explains in the book's introduction. "Together with our neighbors, we lived and worked on the land, obtained and prepared our own food, and made our own homes, tools, and clothing. After our ancestors invented agriculture, most of us lived in small communities where the land was held and farmed in common, and most production was consumed locally."

In medieval England, the king granted land to various landlords. The landlords rented some of their land to peasants who would work the land, raising crops, keeping cattle, sheep, or other animals. In this pre-capitalist system, peasants had to give a portion of their crop to the landlord and use the rest for their own needs.

Mike McCallister grew up in Milwaukee, receiving a BA in history from UW-Milwaukee. He is a member of the National Writers Union and Solidarity.



### The Commons and its Destruction

If some land in the grant area was not rented, the peasants worked together to use these patches in

common and collectively oversee their management. Commoners decided what crops to raise there, and what family would use what part of the land. These rights were lifelong for the peasants who worked the land.

Over a few centuries, the landlords seized ("enclosed") the common lands on their property. Later, capitalists seeking to stop self-sufficient food production enclosed more land. Instead of growing food to feed people, agriculture became a method of producing wealth.

Privatization of common land was a frequent reason for enclosure. As this common land was a source of sustenance (pasture, wood, game) for the peasants who lived there, access to these resources was a life-and-death question.

When landlords wanted to enlarge their estates, they sought to run their tenants off the land with raised rents or adjusted lease terms. If the peasants resisted, they'd resort to forcibly evicting the tenants. Upon gaining control, they would then "enclose" the parcel for their own purposes.

Often, the landlord would turn enclosed land into a "deer park." Peasants couldn't farm this land, but deer could roam free, at least until the gentry organized hunts to kill them.

Eventually, hungry farmers aimed to stay alive by killing deer and other game animals. Landlords responded by criminalizing the taking of game by anyone other than property-holders.

Between 1703 and 1830, Parliament passed 45 separate statutes against "poaching" deer, rabbits and other game. This "Bloody Code" intended to stop the killing of animals by the wrong sort of people.

Angus explains that "Depending on which law was used, for the same offense, a convicted poacher might be fined, whipped, pilloried, imprisoned at hard labor, transported (sent to Australia), or executed." You might gather

how successful these laws were by counting the number of them.

### Organized Resistance and Rebellion

Angus' main theme is how commoners resisted the taking of their land, using a variety of methods. "Enclosure of common land, a direct assault on the peasants' centuries-old way of life," he writes, "upset the old habit of submission."

Protests against enclosure began as far back as 1450, when "tens of thousands of English peasants fought, and thousands died, to halt the spread of capitalist farming that was destroying their way of life."

Kett's Rebellion, just one part of this uprising, is considered by some to be "the greatest anticapitalist rising in English history."

Up to 16,000 rebels fought off royal soldiers in Norwich, then the second-largest city in England for six weeks in the summer of 1450. When 4000 German and Italian mercenaries arrived to quell the rebellion, 3500 rebels were killed and their leaders tortured and beheaded.

Similar episodes appear in various sizes, scale, and degrees of success throughout the text; the chronology of events in the back is very helpful. Landlords battle peasants to enclose land hosting coal deposits for powering machinery. Peasants also fight privatization of royal "forests," many of which have no trees. Some of the biggest fights occur in defense of common use of "fens (wetlands)."

The most significant of these happened during the English Revolution and in the years of enclosing the Scottish Highlands, called the Clearances. Each of these get a chapter of their own.

The English Revolution spawned the Diggers movement, led by Gerrard Winstanley.

On April 1, 1649, the Diggers seized undeveloped common land on St. George's Hill, southwest of London, intending to "lay the foundation of making the earth a common treasury for all." They were driven out by August. Angus writes that they thought they could win mass support, but didn't realize how determined the landlords were.

In the same period, another radical movement grew in English cities. Disparaged by conservatives as "Levellers," they grew into one of the largest radical working-class movements of the period. Angus argues that



it blew an opportunity for success when it failed to unite with rural anti-enclosure protesters.

Leveller leader Richard Overton had demanded that “all grounds which anciently lay in common for the poor, and are now inappropriate, enclosed, and fenced in, may forthwith (in whose hands soever they are) be cast out, and laid open again to the free and common use and benefit of the poor.”

Two years later, however, the Leveller manifesto, *Agreement of the People*, failed to mention enclosures. No evidence exists that the Leveller leadership sought to connect with the anti-enclosure movement.

Winstanley may be little-remembered today (or perhaps just written out of history), but, Angus argues, might just be one of the most significant radical social thinkers ever.

Winstanley's *Law of Freedom in a Platform, or True Magistracy Restored* “is often described as his blueprint for an ideal society,” Angus writes, “but it is better understood as a description of a transitional society in which reconstruction is well underway.”

The fight to defend the Highlands was based on the claim that each Scottish Clan had over parts of the country. When England and Scotland merged into what became Great Britain in 1706, the landlords saw an opening.

The enclosure process in Scotland was better organized and systematic because landlords and capitalists had over a century of experience. Agriculture in the lowlands was organized much closer to the classic feudal model, and adapted to the English class structure.

When Scotland banned the import of Irish cattle in 1667, landlords began evicting small farmers working in potential grazing lands. These lands then became fenced-in “cattle parks.”

Farmers in Galloway resisted by taking down (“levelling”) the fences. Some of these actions were backed by 2000 or more armed men. This uprising required six troops of British dragoons to suppress. We know little of the fate of the Galloway Levellers, but Angus suggests that many of them joined other Scots in North America.

### Slavery and Imperialism

Even if you're not well versed in English history, you probably know two things about this period: Before 1807, the British were very active in the slave trade; and throughout this period of enclosure that we're discussing here came the expanding British Empire.

Angus reports that “the aristocrats and gentry who waged the war on the commons included many whose wealth originated overseas. The two main sources of that expropriated wealth in the 1700s were the slave trade and plantation slavery in the Caribbean, and colonial plunder in India.”

While it may not surprise you to learn that enclosure is closely connected to these institutions, these statistics might still surprise you:

- In the second half of the 18th century, about 50 members of Parliament had connections to Caribbean plantations. The “West Indian Interest” consistently voted against proposals to weaken or end plantation slavery.
- When Britain abolished slavery in the Empire in 1834, the government paid 20 million pounds to compensate 46,000 West Indian slaveowners — half of them living in Britain.
- In 2020, the National Trust (equivalent to the US National Register of Historic Places) directly connected the owners of 29 of its 200+ historic houses to recipients of slave compensation. About a third of these houses had colonial connections.
- Community Land Scotland discovered that 10% of all of Scotland (and one-half of the Western Highlands and Islands) has been owned by families that benefitted significantly from slavery.
- Meanwhile, as Mike Davis wrote in *Late Victorian Holocausts*: “If the history of India were to be condensed into a single fact, it is this: there was no increase in India's per capita income from 1757 to 1947.”

Many of the landlords who benefited from the age of Parliamentary Enclosures from the 17th century forward were employees of the East India Company, whose brutal and rapacious history is also outlined here.

### Contemporary Struggles

Angus also takes up one of the most famous essays of the 1960s, Garret Hardin's “The Tragedy of the Commons.”

In an early ideological salvo against a growing environmental movement, Hardin suggested that humans were too self-interested to cooperate to sustain common resources. Offering no evidence, he tells a “just-so story” about a “rational herdsman” who lays waste to the commons by aiming to maximize his income. “Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all,” Hardin wrote.

“The very fact that commons-based agriculture lasted for centuries disproves Hardin's assumptions,” Angus writes. “Where were the gain-maximizing rational herdsman during all those years, and why did communities fiercely resist all attempts to eliminate common rights?”

Angus takes the struggle for land to the Global South in his final chapter, “The Struggle Continues.” The battle between capitalist agribusiness and peasant lives indeed continues. He reprints a manifesto released by the *La Via Campesina* International Peasants Movement in 2007, pointing the way to the future.

*The War Against the Commons* lays out in

detail how capitalists act as a ruling class by turning to their state to enforce the policies and behavior they require. When piecemeal enclosure wasn't getting the job done, landlords and capitalists turned to Parliament to pass laws that bent the commonly accepted rules about buying and selling land — and access to the commons.

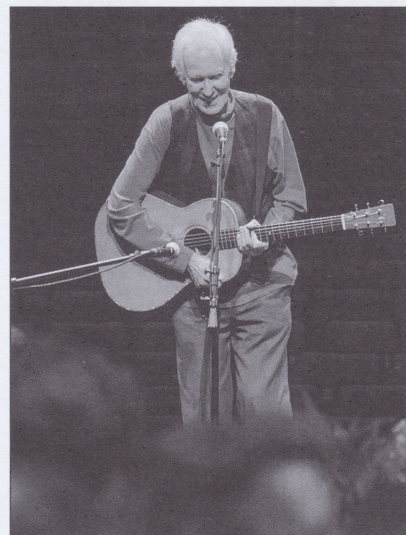
When peasants had the temerity to kill animals for food, they made hunting only legal for the gentry! And then made killing animals for food subject to the death penalty!

Angus has long been a leader of the ecosocialist movement, and here provides a better way to think about how to seize power.

As Gerrard Winstanley reminds us: “When this universal law of equity rises up in every man and woman, then none shall lay claim to any creature, and say, this is mine and that is yours, this is my work, that is yours, but every one shall put to their hands to till the earth, and bring up cattle, and the blessing of the earth shall be common to all, when a man hath need of any corn or cattle, take from the next storehouse he meets with. The whole earth shall be a common treasury for every man.” ■

## Congratulations Frank Hamilton!

Frank will be inducted into FARHOF, Folk Americana Roots Hall of Fame in Boston, April 24, 2024.



Music for Frank Hamilton is folk art, a collective activity created from the bottom up by people who are not taking orders or trying to be someone else. It's socialist, made for use not for profit.

Read about Frank Hamilton's life and work as a people's musician in *Against the Current* #224, May-June 2023. Check out Frank's website: <https://frankhamilton.net/>



# REVIEW

## Toward a "Transsexualized Marxism" By M. Colleen McDaniel

### Transgender Marxism

Edited by Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke.

Foreword by Jordy Rosenberg

London: Pluto Press, \$22.95 paperback.

THE COLLECTION OF 14 essays that comprise *Transgender Marxism* offers a theory for Marxists to begin our ascent into a fuller understanding of gender inequity and its dance with class antagonism. The book brings together theoretical arguments from trans people placing transness within the context of a Marxist framework.

According to editors Gleeson and O'Rourke, not only does a theory of Transgender Marxism already exist, it is "already a flourishing field, if one that has found itself confined to the most esoteric and fleeting outlets" in marginal publications and private accounts. (1)

Transgender Marxism, as a school of thought, is not "Trans people doing Marxism" or Marxist analysis of trans people's lives." (Rosa Lee, 62)

Although as Gleeson and O'Rourke point out, trans people's "struggle for emancipation has become understood as one progression within a broader process of class war" (3), this school of thought proposes "a transformed Marxism, a Marxism which has been in some way transsexualised. A Marxism which has undergone or is embarking on a process of transition." (Lee, 62)

*Transgender Marxism* offers for political and gender theorists an alternative Marxist theory that sees the interplay of gender and class. As put by the editors, "We cannot set capitalism on one side, as a fixed and dependable feature, with gender on the other as a 'cultural' set of norms and identifications. The two admix at every turn...Our gendered

Edited by Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke



forged for emancipation from the pains of capitalism and patriarchal gender: communism. The editors participate in the "practice of thinking with Marx in spirit rather than in letter. [They] think with him in order to think against and beyond his limits" (Gleeson & O'Rourke, 7).

Not a collection for beginner Marxists, *Transgender Marxism* is dense. Quite often names and theories are mentioned without much explanation of their significance, requiring the reader to be "in on the joke" of why a theorist was mentioned. Some essays are more accessible than others; however, for the reader to gain the fullest comprehension of the context of the arguments, the book requires a previous (and even somewhat broad) knowledge of Marxist theory.

I found myself frustrated multiple times and tended to skim past the unexplained name-dropping by some essayists, although I was still able to retain a comprehension of the main arguments. This is to say that this book does not appear to be written for just anyone to be able to pick up and gain a full understanding of its theory.

### Difficult Encounters

As a genderqueer person myself and a gender scholar (not a political or economic theorist) who trained mostly under radical feminists, I found *Transgender Marxism's* thesis highly refreshing. More than once, I have hesitated to identify as a Marxist because of its limitations around gender theory. And more specifically, as a queer person, in the few Marxist spaces I've been in, I've felt a lack of depth of theory on gender.

I have encountered (as the editors call them) "'class first' leftists" who see gender as a product of capitalism rather than something that simultaneously is sustained by, and sustains, capitalism. The editors note, "The problem with so-called class-reductionist perspectives is that to reduce to class often enough means a failure to explain how class

experiences are dominated by capital, yes, but capitalism's relation to gender is one of mutual dependence." (14).

They go on to argue that "the oppression of trans people remains unmistakably capitalist" (16); hence *Transgender Marxism* offers a path

divisions arise historically, or are sustained." (17)

Marxist feminists for decades (at least) have known this critique in relation to social reproduction; what's been missing is how exactly trans individuals fit into this reproduction of capitalism — and more importantly, how they fit into its destruction. This "transitioning" of Marxism is highly needed, and for me well timed as I see myself in a years-long transition into Marxism.

I did find myself applauding the book for offering such a whole picture of gender: not reducing it to nature-versus-nurture, or real versus made up, but offering an understanding of gender as at once individual and communal, oppressive and liberating.

I am a social cognitive psychologist, wherein lies my biggest hesitancy (with any Marxist theory of psychology): I see very little value in Freud or psychoanalysis.

*Transgender Marxism* does not sit in psychoanalysis long, but some essayists do draw upon a psychoanalytic framework. While I tend to find any psychoanalytic argument to hold little credence, the book does include powerful social cognitive perspectives of gender development.

Aside from the few aforementioned moments of hesitancy, this book serves a purpose beyond this call for a transitioning of Marxism, but also as an unveiling of the need for transitioning gender theories into Marxism.

I'll also admit that some essays probably left me with more questions than answers. I won't say the book was devoid of answers; in fact quite a few essays offer the solution to the plight of the oppression of transgender people and of the proletariat as a whole: communism. Indeed, *Transgender Marxism* (the school of thought, not just the book) makes a very evident argument: *Liberation from gender inequity and the oppression of trans people is dependent on the end of capitalism.*

### Social Reproduction Theory

To appeal first to the Marxists, especially the "class-first" Marxists who may be questioning picking up *Transgender Marxism*, I will offer a theory that names this "mutual dependency" of gender and capitalism. As asserted by Gleeson and O'Rourke, we know "that capitalism does [trans people] harm... what must be explained is how it survives through [trans people]." (17)

Social reproduction theory is where

Dr. M. Colleen McDaniel (she/they) is an award-winning anti-violence activist and interpersonal violence prevention expert based in the Northern Virginia/DC area. Dr. McDaniel has organized for graduate workers' rights, anti-sexual harassment, and Title IX reform with the Graduate Organizing Committee, AFT #6123 in Detroit, MI and the Alliance for Survivor Choice in Reporting Policies. Dr. McDaniel has conducted and published original psychological research on young men's sexual aggression perpetration, Social Norms Theory, and Cultural Betrayal Trauma Theory. Their public scholarship includes publications in *Against the Current*, *A Socialist Journal*, *People's World*, and *Spark Magazine*. Their work can be found on Twitter and Instagram @violence\_femme.



the interdependence of gender and capital come to fruition. Zoe Belinsky describes social reproduction theory as "the labourer in capitalism sells her labour power as a market commodity in exchange for a wage, but that wage doesn't directly reproduce the labourer's existence. Fundamentally unwaged labour outside of the sphere of production is required for the labourer to be able to return the work the next day," she adds, "and for past labourers (retirees) and future labourers (children) to continue existing and receive the care they need." (188)

Queer people play a vital role in the reproduction of labor, as we are predominantly in care spaces: sex work, service industry, and care work.

This argument is not simple to make, however, as trans people do not fit neatly into the nuclear family; rather, "transpeople's exclusion from the heterosexual family unit is central to [their] economic disempowerment and [their] difficulties with social reproduction." (Belinsky, 188)

Yet there is an emotional labor demanded of queer people, especially queer femme and feminine people. Essayist Nat Raha makes an argument for queer and trans social reproduction by sharing a list from lesbian and bisexual women living in Margaret Thatcher's UK.

Raha explains, "Rather than homogenising the experience of queer women, the group aimed to make visible the variety of demands for labour made by society upon them for survival, amid a lack of recognition that such work was even taking place at all."

Even though trans people may be excluded from (and often forcibly and violently pushed out of) the patriarchal nuclear family, queer and trans people still labor and provide emotional labor for laborers. Raha offers the critique that "Marxist feminism has yet to bring into view the caring, domestic, and emotional labour, which is the precondition of [their] survival." (87, 88)

An intense emotional labor is required of queer people to keep each other alive. Raha goes on to call out that "this work occurs in the absence of institutions for social support and alongside the harm [of] misogynist ideas about care labour, where endless free emotional labour is simply the role [their] communities have for femme and feminine people." (90)

Trans people's social reproduction lies both in this struggle for existence and in the very work they do. Belinsky offers a portrait of queer communities that have cared for each other, and in doing so offers a vital expansion to social reproduction theory which considers "such labour both as work of resistance that enable [their] being...and as unpaid labour...work that is valuable and necessary." (105) Indeed, "for the time being, we struggle for our lives even as this very

struggle is being turned to the ruling classes' riches." (Belinsky, 107)

Michelle O'Brien's essay on Trans Work goes even deeper into the interplay of trans identity and work. Specifically, she argues that "trans work struggle, and what they offer to the broader gender freedom of the working class, break open the relationship between identity and class struggle." (59)

O'Brien reminds readers that this is not just another identity politics, rather, "Communists and Marxists have long recognized that the kinds of work we do shapes not only the kind of misery we face, but also how we are able to organise." (50)

Her argument solidifies in pointing out that "all work imposes some varying forms of expectations for gender expression and gendered behavior." (57) She demonstrates the dependency of labor on gendering with examples such as "masculine toughness in the face of the dangers in many industrial manufacturing jobs" and "the gracious feminizing and racialized subservience expected by service staff," as well as "highly gendered dress codes of white-collar employment," and "the maternal activities of teaching, nursing and childcare." (57-58)

In this way O'Brien makes evident the forced gendering of work not only true for trans people but for people of all genders. Best summarized by her statement, "Like many people's experience of the family, employment is an institution of gender violence and everyday coercion." (58)

### Development of Gender/Sex

*Transgender Marxism* redefines gender and sex by arguing that sex, like gender, is also socially created, reminding us that gender is derived as a marker of sex. Essayist Rosa Lee applies Judith Butler's perspective that "the sexed body itself is social rather than natural."

Lee quotes Judith Butler's argument that "gender is not just to culture as sex is to nature. Gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive.'" (65)

Furthering this notion that sex is also social, Virginia Guitzel states "in order to imprison the human being in alienated labour, it is necessary to mutilate it by reducing its sexuality to the genitals."

She states that "genitalization is destined to remove from the body its function of reproducing pleasure to convert it into an instrument of alienated production, but only sexualising what is indispensable for reproduction" — this reproduction of course serving the reproduction of capitalism. (123)

British neurobiologist Gina Rippon is known for her argument that "a gendered world will produce a gendered brain," calling out a long history of neuroscience that has attempted to prove that 'males' and 'females'

are neurologically different.

Applied here, the genius of this short phrase is that it reveals a much bigger truth: science is biased by the world and its patriarchal, capitalistic paradigms.

In order to understand gender/sex, science starts with the wrong question: why are people trans, rather than focusing on why does anyone have gender? Scientists are (albeit not alone) to blame for the validation of "sex" as being entirely defined by biology, while gender is the entirety of how we act, see ourselves, dress, and otherwise exist in the world.

However, according to *Transgender Marxism* sex, like gender, is an unmeasurable trait reduced to visible genitalia, that serves to uphold class division. To Transgender Marxism, gender and sex are the very product of a society that depends on a laboring force (proletariats) holding up the few (bourgeoisie). That is, gender and sex serve one god, capitalism.

In her essay "How Do Gender Transitions Happen?" Gleeson quotes Julia Serano's comments on the "etiological" fixation of writing on trans issues: the fascination around why it is certain people become transgender."

Serano maintains, "The unceasing search to uncover the cause of transsexuality is designed to keep transsexual gender identities in a perpetually questionable state, thereby ensuring that cissexual gender identities continue to be unquestionable." (70)

In *Transgender Marxism*, rather than asking the question "why does transness exist?" essayists seek to define the way in which gender and sex develop within the context of transition. Throughout, the essayists argue the development of transness by challenging alternative theories of gender development.

For example, Noah Zazanis points out that "many liberal trans-affirmative arguments have relied on essentialisms (biological or otherwise) to justify the necessity of transition, and the validity of trans identity."

Zazanis offers a shift from this essentialism by claiming that "transgender identification is not inherent, or even necessarily constant. Instead, trans identities are formed responsive to their social context," that is, transition happens "through the exercise of individual and collective agency." (33)

He challenges radical feminist Catherine A MacKinnon's view of gender development via gender socialization: "the process through which women come to identify themselves as sexual beings, as beings which exist for men." He asks instead, "if womanhood is defined by forcible sexual submission, what positive content could trans women see that draws them towards a female identification?" (34)

Zazanis points out the missing piece in gender socialization theory in that it provides no explanation for "why any person, trans or cis, may choose to reject the prescriptive





roles into which they are socialised through transition, feminist resistance, or gender nonconformity of any sort." (36)

Rather, he argues for a development of gender that happens through social cognitive processes wherein "people have the ability to choose their social influences." For example, Zazanis describes the process of enactive experience wherein "individuals engage in gendered behavior, observe how others respond, and adjust their behavior accordingly." (39)

This gender development applies to both cis and trans people in that hegemonic masculinity and femininity are also modeled and then policed by others for people to learn how to act their assigned gender.

As detailed in the personal narrative from Farah Thompson, "over the years I've learned that I am just an echo of someone else's expectations, and that my humanity is contingent on responding to that." (159)

Trans people learn the gender they are assigned while also existing against that gender, learning who they are and having the autonomy and capacity to choose another path: transition.

### What is Transition?

Gleeson too attempts to answer the development of gender by distinguishing between two understandings of how transitions develop: "one that centres transitions as the consequences of trans people overcoming an array of hurdles on a personal level," and a second that "centres the work of trans communities in the realisation of [their] genders." Gleeson describes these communities as "loose collectives [who] provide a context or 'space' for the articulation of new language, lifestyle developments, and culture." (71)

It's in being in community and caring for

one's community that a person develops into transness. This interplay between the individual concern for transitioning how one is perceived by society and the influence of trans communities on gender development is a common theme across the book's essays.

I read the decentralizing of individual development of transness as a biological- or internal-only process as a denial of individualism, and a call towards communism by highlighting the interdependence of our very beings on interconnectedness with others.

While many gender scholars and theorists (including both those who are anti-trans and those who are trans allied) call for the abolition of gender, it is often at the expense of dismissing the complexities of transition. It is also here that transphobic arguments emerge.

For example, TERFs ["trans-excluding radical feminists" — ed.] claim that trans women perpetuate stereotypes about gender: wearing heels and dresses and makeup, talking a certain way, walking a certain way. However, Anja Heisler Weiser Flower challenges this in her essay — which I felt had the most depth on defining gender/sex and transition.

Weiser Flower argues that although many Marxists write off the abstraction of sex/gender as merely identity politics, admitting that "such politics of course inevitably does involve identity," she details that "the identity is not the main thing; rather, identity is a representation of the abstraction" (247).

In this way, "naming represents the abstraction; the abstraction itself is not a name" (that is, naming gender/sex represents the abstraction of gender/sex). Trans people, as asserted by Weiser Flower, "are crushed under an abstraction" ('abstraction in this sense meaning "sex/gender") "which [they]

have developed against;" and so, trans people transition because "naming [their] condition facilitates [their] living under the abstraction...which allows [them] to concretise [their] personhood more fully." (252)

According to this argument, this is not "a final overcoming of her domination via abstraction. Such an overcoming can't happen individually. She is making a vital move towards a more liveable life, yes — but she's forcing her way into renegotiating her alienation, not abolishing it."

To demand that trans people abolish gender without calling for cis people to do the same via the abolition of capitalism

is unfair. As Weiser Flower puts it, "Cis or trans, we create ourselves and our conditions, while our conditions create us." (253)

As is the comparison in Weiser Flower's essay, we can think of gender transition as we do unions. Certainly, let us call for the abolition of work, but until we can do so in full, we form unions to make our working conditions and our lives livable.

O'Brien's essay takes this further, declaring that "gender expression is central to human fulfilment, to our creativity and our dignity, to express beauty, and to experience pleasure. Trans people — whatever the limits or costs — show a remarkable and rare commitment to courageously following nonconforming yet fulfilling self-expression." (60)

For trans people, there is a catch-22 of sorts to be "both seeking and resisting the power of other people to validate [their] realness." (Nathaniel Dickson, 206)

Dickson notes that "there is always a very tangible and sometimes life-threatening pressure to fit in, to be acknowledged as 'real' people, even if it means giving over definitional authority to those that oppress and exploit [them]." If not for an immediate discounting or abolition of gender for liberation, it is easy to fall into a "liberal inclusion politics" (208); however, it would also be reductive to claim that all trans people seek this inclusion.

At an individual level, transition involves "amassing a medley of decisive features, which inform the public at large of how you expect to be read, both overtly and on an intuitive level" (Gleeson, 72), yet it is also more than that.

Nathaniel Dickson adds that "Transition is estrangement," by which Dickson means adding "difficulty to the seeming naturalness



of things, and in doing so to prolong and make strange our perception of the everyday so that we might see it anew." (206)

Transition is an act (or many acts) done to be able to survive under the current conditions. It is not until we rid ourselves of capitalism that our full potential to exist free of gender will be realized. Until then, we cannot reduce transition nor gender by demanding its immediate destruction without a concurrent destruction of capitalism.

### Strategizing for Liberation

As stated earlier, *Transgender Marxism's* purpose is to call for liberation through the end of capitalism. In her review of Brazil's politics, Virginia Guitzel argues "given that the capitalist system prevents us realising our liberation, this cannot be achieved in a linear path towards social emancipation through education and a gradual struggle against ignorance and prejudice." Rather, Guitzel argues "we must revolutionize trade unions and student organisations, to transform them into instruments of struggle." (129, 130)

In her essay on strategizing against work, Kate Doyle Griffiths calls for a "new Marxist strategy for class organisation. One that not only affirms 'trans rights' as a moral or even tactical position — but transgender liberation." (137)

Griffiths calls for a "mashup — of (Kim) Moody's rank-and file strategy" that is, to prioritize striking in certain areas of labor (i.e. logistics) as "chokepoints" to significantly disrupt profit making in order for intervention. Griffiths argues that the inclusion of trans and queer laborers would mean to identify social reproduction as a chokepoint.

As was demonstrated by recent waves of teacher strikes, "workers who are paid to do the daily remaking of the working-class-in-itself play a central role in expanding

and politicising workplace struggles. These moments allow for raising universal class-wide demands, precisely because workers in feminised reproductive sectors like education are in daily contact with the deepening crisis of care that impacts the entire class."

Whatever the strategy may be, Griffiths argues, "far from being an obstacle to be overcome in the class war, trans and queer workers are and can be organised as its leading edge." (151)

Put most explicitly, says Virginia Guitzel, "Liberation for trans people requires a tireless struggle against all structures of domination...as a contribution to the building of a new society. One defined by relations between freely associated workers — that is, communism." (130)

In my transition from radical feminist to

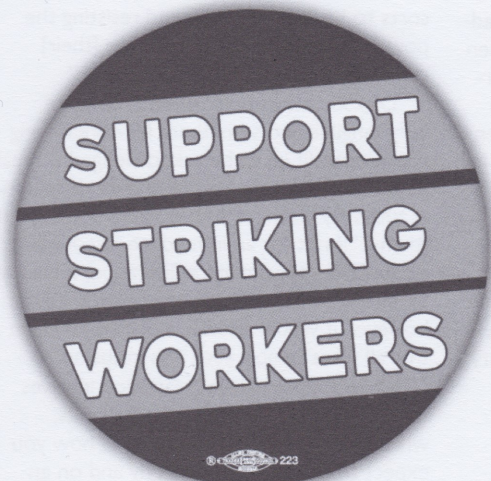
Marxist, I felt a strange dichotomy: Radical feminism had everything explained through gender, but no true solution for defeating patriarchy; Marxism had all the answers, but was severely lacking in its understanding of gender. Little did I know, there has been a school of thought existing in the margins to resolve the latter.

I have been left fully convinced that a Marxism that has undergone transition, *Transgender Marxism* as suggested in this book, is an absolute necessity for liberation from capitalism, from the confines of sex/gender, and for a world in which humans can live to their fullest potential: communism.

I highly recommend *Transgender Marxism* for Marxists, feminists, and Marxist feminists alike. Any person slightly aware of the restrictions of gender needs this book. ■

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# REVIEW

## A Primer on Abolition

By Kristian Williams

### Abolition for the People:

The Movement for a Future without Police & Prisons

edited by Colin Kaepernick

Kaepernick Publishing, 243 pages + endmatter, \$27 paper.

ABOLITION IS AUDACIOUS. How could it not be?

In that spirit, on its very first page, the new collection *Abolition for the People* makes some striking promises:

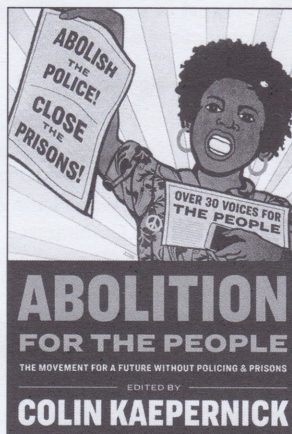
"Abolition for the People draws on historical analysis, empirical data, and the firsthand accounts of survivors [of state and interpersonal violence] . . . to make a straightforward argument: Neither prisons nor police keep people safe, nor do they create the conditions necessary for communities to thrive. Abolition for the People further argues that efforts to reform police and prisons have nearly always enhanced their power, reach, and legitimacy. Simply stated, police and prisons . . . are death-making machines that run counter to harm reduction and the possibility of authentic human flourishing." (13)

On the whole, the book delivers. Its 38 chapters include contributions from an impressive set of heavy-hitters: Angela Davis, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Robin D.G. Kelley, Andrea Ritchie, Dylan Rodríguez, Dean Spade, and of course Colin Kaepernick, who served as the main editor.

(Kaepernick — I will explain for those like myself who throw away the sports page without looking at it — was essentially driven out of the NFL for kneeling during the national anthem in protest of police brutality and racial inequality. He is now more focused on writing and publishing.)

The book's four sections examine the history and role of the police, and that of prisons, the limits of reform, and the possibilities for abolition. Many chapters focus on the experiences of particular groups of people — people of color, and African-Americans especially, but also queer and trans people, immigrants, students, people with disabilities, Indigenous peoples — emphasizing the ways the criminal legal system harms them and how the abolition of police and prisons

Kristian Williams is the author of *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America*, *Fire the Cops!*, and *Gang Politics: Revolution, Repression, and Crime*. He is presently at work on a history of policing in Portland, Oregon, where he lives.



would contribute to their collective liberation. Each critique also represents an angle of attack and identifies a potential constituency for an emerging movement.

### The Abolitionists

In 2020, after the police murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis, many millions of people took to the streets. Some

engaged in purely nonviolent protest, some in property destruction and looting, and some in direct combat with the police. They were, on the whole, acting as abolitionists, whether or not they had specifically abolitionist ideas in mind at the time.

Many millions of others watched this happening and struggled to make sense of it. Kaepernick's collection would well serve either group, providing a range of ideas for understanding not only the momentous events of a few years ago, but the ongoing disaster that is the criminal legal system.

What *Abolition for the People* does well — and I think it does this exceptionally well — is to serve as a primer for those new to these ideas, either entering into activism or simply curious about demands to defund the police, abolish ICE, etc.

The chapters are very short, typically around seven pages. And, though the level of intellectual engagement is often very high, none of them make for difficult reading.

Each piece can stand on its own, and they all end with discussion questions. At the back of the volume, there is a glossary and a list of resources for further reading — or to get involved politically. The collection is perfectly suited for use in study groups, and one hopes that political organizations, groups of concerned citizens, and your mom's book-and-wine club will make use of it in this manner.

### Identity and Class

Most chapters center issues of identity, for good reason: the police predictably behave in ways that reinforce and preserve various kinds of status hierarchies, the structure of white supremacy foremost among them. Unfortunately, the foregrounding of identity means that capitalism becomes a background

feature, a contextual element frequently acknowledged but rarely incorporated into an argument.

Capitalism is most present in Talila A. Lewis's essay on disability justice, which counterposes abolitionist ideals with our present society's presumption that a human being's worth inheres her capacity for productive labor. More commonly, though, class is simply listed as one among many markers of identity. Given the anti-capitalist credentials of several of the contributors (most notably Angela Davis), I expect that this cursory treatment is simply a matter of emphasis necessitated by the brevity of the individual chapters.

However, as this emphasis is sustained in one chapter after another, it may leave a reader with the impression that class is a thing to be mentioned rather than studied, and that it is mainly a concern in the context of race politics (in understanding disputes between poor and middle-class Blacks, for example), as opposed to an exploitative social relation deserving destruction in its own right. This is a political as well as a theoretical shortcoming.

Although the collection clearly demonstrates that a number of particular groups have related but specific reasons for opposing the police and prisons, it does little to indicate *why* people outside of those identity categories might also be against the police, or why they should be. A class analysis could fill in part of this gap.

### Prison and Poverty

Poverty is a major focus of police attention — from the criminalization of sex work and other sectors of the informal economy, to the persecution of the homeless, to the class-coded norms of "public order" and "quality of life" campaigns, the intimate connection between policing and public housing, the cooptation of social services in the name of "community policing," the use of ICE to prevent immigrant workers from unionizing, and riot cops protecting scabs and attacking picket lines. When these dynamics appear in Kaepernick's collection, they are generally described in terms of racism or other discrimination, rather than class and poverty.

What is worse, some contributors slip into speaking of race and class as though they inter-derivable, defining the "carceral class" (for example) as "persons of African descent who are systematically stigmatized as unfit



for freedom and deserving of the dehumanization that comes with being incarcerated.” (This definition occurs three times, on pages 137, 141, and 288, and is identified as “a new term to the Black freedom lexicon.”) Though a recent Bureau of Justice Statistics report shows that Black people are an astonishing 4.5 times as likely to go to prison as white people, they constitute not quite a third of inmates (591,000 out of 1.8 million).

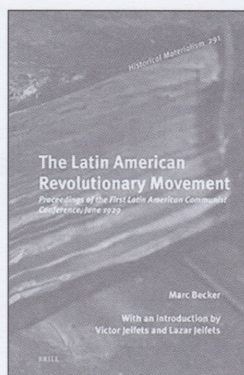
A greater number of those in jail and prison are white (658,000), and nearly as many (526,000) are of other races. That is quite a lot of people to exclude from the “carceral class,” and doing so leaves a potential ground for cross-racial solidarity largely untended.

One thing that nearly everyone in prison has in common, preceding their confinement, is poverty. Class cannot, of course, replace race in our understanding of the criminal legal system, or in our efforts toward abolition, but neither can we do without it.

Of course, no one book can do everything, and a call to broaden the abolitionist analysis is almost built in to this volume’s presentation, both as a challenge to readers and an invitation. The abolitionist project is necessarily expansive; it has to press ever further and reach into new and unexamined aspects of our society precisely because the institutions it seeks to abolish are themselves so expansive, so intrusive, so ubiquitous.

“Changing everything might sound daunting,” Mariame Kaba writes in the final chapter, “but it also means there are many places to start, infinite opportunities to collaborate, and endless imaginative interventions and experiments to create.” (242) ■

## Echoes of Revolution — continued from page 36



content and nature of their debates nearly a century later.

The meeting had flaws and gaps that still plague leftist organizers today. Tempers would flare, misunderstandings needed to be clarified. Anyone who has had fallings out with fellow comrades more over personalities than policy issues will recognize some of the tensions at the meeting. The delegates were humans just like the rest of us. But at the end they all came together to sing “The Internationale.”

### Recovering the Record

Organizers optimistically labeled their gathering as the first international conference of Latin American communist parties, implying that there were more to come. In reality, it would be the last — a brief moment when Latin American revolutionaries were able to

dialogue with the representatives of the Comintern.

The First Latin American Communist Conference continues to serve as a valuable historical reference for contemporary discussions. It highlights the enduring relevance of debates on organizational strategies, class struggles, and identity politics.

While the specific context has evolved, the fundamental questions posed during that conference continue to inform and shape the struggles of our time.

*From the very beginning of organizing for the conference, one agenda topic was to be women’s issues, but all the delegates were men. Although the Comintern’s South American Secretariat circulated resolutions on women’s issues, presenting a clarion call for gender equality and women’s rights, the lack of women’s attendance highlights the gap between ideals and lived realities.*

The South American Secretariat of the Communist International published the debates from this historic conference in a book sold at cost so it could be widely distributed. The Secretariat similarly published the conference resolutions in its periodical *La Correspondencia Sudamericana*.

The organizers hoped that those publications would contribute to theoretical and strategic debates in revolutionary circles across the Americas and beyond. But for the first time, these debates and resolutions are being published in an English translation as part of the *Historical Materialism* book series with Brill. Haymarket Books will follow up with a paperback edition in 2024. ■

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## **Bargaining for the “Common Good”**

Attention in the press, even the left press, has primarily focused on the gains outlined in the three contracts: eliminating the category of permanent temps, reducing the wage scale of new hires from eight years to three, winning a 25% wage increase over the life of the contract and restoring COLA. These are remarkable wins. Although unable to restore post-retirement health care and pensions for those hired after 2007, the UAW did manage to win management's upping its contribution to 401ks.

A couple of the other UAW demands pointed toward the future in a restructuring industry. While the old guard had been relatively silent about the EV transition because they saw it as a job loss for which they had no answer, Fain called for a “just transition” to a greener economy.

Three demands point the way. First was more time off in order to give workers a chance to have a life outside of work. Second was the demand that if plants are shut, workers should be eligible for corporation-paid community service work for a period of time.

Third was the right to strike over plant closures. Fain talked about how 65 plants had been closed over 20 years, included the recent “idling” of the Belvidere plant. These closures not only threaten the worker and family members, but devastate hometowns.

The formulation of these three demands all reach beyond the individual worker and indicate a strategy based on “bargaining for the common good” that many public sector unions are raising. It is particularly relevant given that the new battery plants are often constructed on farmland rather than being built where closed plants idle in a polluted wasteland of broken concrete.

The online *Bridge* magazine reported 26,000 Michigan shuttered and contaminated properties associated with the auto industry. It identified 100 that require at least \$259 million to remediate. As auto companies have abandoned sites including several GM plants in the Lansing area tainted with chemicals “ranging from PCBs and 1,4-dioxane to PFAS,” pollution is seeping into neighborhoods.

Ironically, seven miles west, in Delta Township, GM is building a \$2.6 billion battery plant on farmland. *Bridge* notes:

*“Last year, Michigan awarded GM and partner LG Energy Solution \$344 million in state subsidies to build the joint-venture Ultium Cells Battery plant. The companies also received part of a \$2.5 billion federal loan, and will be eligible for a state tax break on their equipment worth millions more.”* (“As automakers win incentives for EV plants Michigan pays for polluted past,” Michigan Environmental Watch, *Bridge*, September 25, 2023.)

Tying together issues about the length of the work week, the right of workers and their communities to jobs and a work/life balance is only partially realized in what was actually won in the tentative agreements, but they were raised.

According to Fain's October 6 update, GM agreed in writing to place its electric battery production under the master agreement with the UAW. Now that the UAW-Ford agreement is available on the UAW website, we can read that Ford has committed to bringing its future battery plants under their master agreement at the Marshall, Michigan and Tennessee Electric Vehicle Center under one

of two conditions: either through card check or through the transfer of “surplus” UAW members.

The UAW, committed to the reopening of the Belvidere “idled” plant, won not only a product that guarantees work but also an agreement that employees at their battery facility will be UAW members. Not only did Stellantis agree to the union's right to strike over plant closings — as the other two have done — but also acknowledged the union's right to strike over the outsourcing existing core jobs as well as its product and investment decisions.

These provisions for the mostly not-yet-open battery plants are remarkable breakthroughs. As Fain remarked on October 6, when GM, faced with a strike on its profitable Arlington, Texas plant, offered to bring its joint-venture employees into the master agreement:

*“We have been told for months this is impossible. We have been told the EV future must be a race to the bottom. We called their bluff.”*

*“What this will mean for our membership cannot be understated. The plan was to draw down engine and transmission plants, and permanently replace them with low-wage battery jobs. We had a different plan.”*

In forcing the reopening of Belvidere, the UAW has renounced the “hands off” approach the union took with the 1950 Treaty of Detroit. Then the union agreed to cede management control over investment decisions for job security. Now it is demanding both.

## **The Prospects**

The new UAW leadership needed to break out of the old apathetic dynamic. It began by organizing a campaign for the contract, encouraging members to sign up for weekly updates on what became known as the “Stand Up Strike.”

As with every contract, enforcing its guarantees will be critical, and in this case even more than most. At the local and level leadership remains in the hands of Administration Caucus loyalists, whose commitment to the new methods of struggle and the union's visionary goals are uneven at best. Hopefully some AC members, seeing the victories of a militant campaign, will be won over to the strategy.

The enthusiasm of striking workers, and their sense of fighting not just “for ourselves” but for “the working class” as a whole, is an inspiring sign for the union's future. It is so inspiring that Toyota immediately announced it would raise wages and lower the time between tiers. Obviously this is to stave off attempts of its employees to join the UAW.

Fain has invited workers to join the stand up strategy and join the UAW. He promised that by the time of the 2028 contracts, corporations will find stronger, louder and larger UAW. That's what the UAW must be prepared to do.

As Barry Eidlin tells us, there are 48% more autoworkers today than there were in 1968, it's the union density that has dropped — from 59% in 1983 to 16% in 2022. (“The UAW's Strike Wins Could Mark a Shift Toward a new Kind of Unionism,” *Jacobin*, October 31, 2023)

By virtue of everything that's on the line — the way the strike was waged, the profound change it reflects in the UAW, the implications for all of labor — the 2023 UAW strike opens a new and exciting era. ■



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